

Positionality and Collaboration During Fieldwork: Insights From Research With Co-Nationals Living Abroad

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Abstract: The researcher is a primary instrument in qualitative research. He/she is the key person in facilitating conversations during fieldwork and in making sense of the data. Methodological literature underscores the fact that assuming insider positions or identities during fieldwork aids qualitative researchers in achieving genuine collaboration, which is necessary for collecting trustworthy data. Furthermore, the contingency nature of positionality has been acknowledged sufficiently in literature: whilst the researcher positions himself or herself, he or she is simultaneously positioned by participants. Despite these insights, the manner in which the researchers' identities unfold during fieldwork interactions has attracted little attention in social science scholarship. Detailed accounts of how the researcher might influence the processes of positionality in order to engage participants in a productive collaboration are few. How might the researcher influence his or her positionality to meet the demands of collecting trustworthy data? In this article, I draw on a qualitative study of Zimbabweans in Johannesburg to reflect on how researchers can potentially negotiate, enact, and perform identities within unique relational spaces of fieldwork in order to achieve useful collaboration.

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1. Introduction

Genuine collaboration between the researcher and other fieldwork actors is critical for the collection of ethically sound and trustworthy data. Methodological literature sufficiently demonstrates that achieving collaboration largely depends on how the researcher negotiates the inevitable differences and asymmetries between him- or herself and other fieldwork participants (NG, 2011). Such differences include levels of education, socio-economic backgrounds and gender.

If not addressed, they pose a continuous threat to the collection of trustworthy data. [1]

One might assert that genuine collaboration depends largely on the role of the researcher. He or she is a critical instrument in the research process (PEZALLA, PETTIGREW & MILLER-DAY, 2012). For example, existing literature demonstrates that a researcher can potentially achieve genuine collaboration by assuming multiple positions or identities during fieldwork (HENRY, 2007; LAPUM, 2008). At the same time, however, scholars note that the social conditions such as the relational dynamics unique to field sites constrain the processes of data collection despite the researcher's efforts (HENRY, 2007). The potential role of unique fieldwork conditions speaks to the contingent nature of the researcher's role during fieldwork. Despite these insights, the manner in which the researchers' identities and positionalities unfold during fieldwork interactions has attracted little attention in social science scholarship. [2]

Consequently, existing fieldwork accounts provide few opportunities for sharing insights as to how researchers can potentially negotiate, enact and perform multiple identities during the relational space of fieldwork in order to facilitate access to data. Drawing on my experiences in a fieldwork study of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa, I reflect on how I positioned myself in on-going fieldwork relationships in ways that effectively engaged participants in useful collaboration. [3]

The concepts central to this article are: identity, positionality, accountability, and agency. By agency, I refer to the researcher's role during fieldwork or what he or she does in order to influence the research process to realize research goals. According to Kathleen ST. LOUIS and Angela C. BARTON (2002), positionality refers to a relational place one occupies in different contexts. The term positionality is often used interchangeably with identity. When used in fieldwork accounts, identity generally captures a researcher's notion of self as well as how he or she is recognized by participants during research. James Paul GEE (2001) defines identity as "being recognized as a 'kind of person' in a given context" (p.99). His notion of identity suggests that even when a researcher self-identifies as an insider, such efforts may not translate into a viable strategy for negotiating access to data if corresponding recognition from informants is absent. In addition to agency and positionality, Aimee Carrillo ROWE's (2005, p.22) notion of "accountability for one's social location" is employed to demonstrate that the researcher needs to meet the conditions implicit in an insider position in order to be recognized as an insider, and to sustain such recognition. [4]

As I show below, my fieldwork experiences strengthen the view that the researcher-as-participant (McCALL, 2006) ought to assume internal social locations which reflect the social conditions of group membership in order to be recognized as some kind of insider. Such conditions include behavioral expectations, obligations and sanctions implicit or explicit in a social location, as well as norms of reciprocity that characterize fieldwork interactions. It is pertinent to note, however, that the social conditions which characterize a given social

location may vary depending on the attributes of those actors involved in fieldwork relationships, and their interactions with various institutions in field sites (BONDY, 2012). Therefore, the researcher's agency almost always reflects the unique social conditions of the field—a point which in turn underscores the constructed and situated nature of knowledge (BONDY, 2012; GANGA & SCOTT, 2006; HENRY, 2007). [5]

After the introduction, the article proceeds in four sections. Section 2 provides a background to the article by way of a focused review of debates about the positionality of researchers during fieldwork. Information about the study on which this article draws is given in Section 3. In order to situate the discussion in a geographical setting, details of the context of fieldwork are also provided in this section. In Section 4, I present snapshots of my fieldwork experiences emphasizing the obstacles to collaboration that I encountered during data collection. In addition, I describe the strategies which I employed to gain access to data. Section 5 provides the conclusion which highlights key insights raised throughout the article. [6]

2. Background: From Etic/Emic to Positionality

Debates about the place of the researcher during fieldwork have come a long way. In the 1960s, the notions of "emic" and "etic" were used to refer to qualitative researchers doing fieldwork from within their ethno-national and cultural community or from without, respectively (EPPLEY, 2006). Emic refers to the viewpoint of a researcher who had gained a personal and first-hand experience of a cultural society. Etic denotes the opposite: it describes the perspective of a researcher who lacked the lived experience of the culture and society he or she sought to study. According to EPPLEY(2006), notions of emic and etic somewhat match contemporary characterizations of researchers as either insider or outsider. The insider researcher is conceived of as one who shares a range of cultural markers with research participants including language and its idiom, cultural beliefs as well as attitudes (GANGA & SCOTT, 2006). Furthermore, the insider researcher may share somatic characteristics such as color of skin, hair and eyes with the participant (MERRIAM et al., 2001). On the contrary, the notion of outsider describes a researcher who shares little or no physical and cultural attributes with participants. [7]

Notions of emic/etic and insider/outsider fully acknowledge the qualitative nuances between research conducted by an insider and research carried out by an outsider (EPPLEY, 2006; HENRY, 2003). Since qualitative research generally strives to understand social life from the viewpoint of those who live it, the insider researcher has long been viewed as better positioned to access fieldwork participants and to generate trustworthy data with relative ease (ALCALDE, 2007; HENRY, 2003; MERRIAM et al., 2001; REVEES, 2010). For example, reflecting on fieldwork conducted in Zimbabwe's newsrooms, Hayes M. MABWEAZARA (2010, p.674) concluded that, "there is more to gain from one's 'insider-status' and sustained intuitive and creative inclinations when researching in politically-charged and unpredictable contexts" The view that occupying insider

positions is critical for generating trustworthy evidence has remained stronger in literature, although some counterarguments have emerged. For instance, some scholars argue that doing fieldwork in one's cultural group highlights the social divisions between the researcher and research participants, since as insiders we are uniquely positioned to unravel points of both sameness and difference (GANGA & SCOTT, 2006). The potential differences between the researcher and members of his or her cultural group imply that being an insider does not automatically guarantee greater proximity and better access to participants' inside stories (ibid.). As a result, both insider and outsider statuses have inherent weaknesses and benefits, although these vary from place to place (BREUER & ROTH, 2003; MERRIAM et al., 2001). [8]

According to EPPLEY (2006), the characterization of the researcher's identity during fieldwork in dichotomous terms as *either* insider *or* outsider implicit in the categorizations of emic/etic and insider/outsider fails to sufficiently capture the complexity of the dyadic relationship between the researcher and the participant. Stated otherwise, the straightforward dualism of insider/outsider hardly captures the dynamism and fluidity of the researcher-participant relationship (see for example, ALCALDE, 2007; EPPLEY, 2006; MURRAY, 2003; SONI-SINHA, 2008). Whereas biological and culture-based attributes are important factors that influence the qualitative research process, they do not necessarily determine one's identity during fieldwork. Many other qualities—including levels of education, class and socio-economic backgrounds of both the researcher and the participants—impact on the position of the researcher during fieldwork (ALCALDE, 2007; MERRIAM et al., 2001; PALMER, 2006). For instance, when doing fieldwork among female victims of domestic violence in her home country, Peru, Christina M. ALCALDE (2007) learned that status rather than skin color influenced participants' notions of race. Although she was a naturalized non-White Latina in America, she was generally viewed as White in Peru because there "class, social status, education, and place of origin all contribute to one's 'race'" (p.145). Such notions of race which Christina M. ALCALDE discovered during fieldwork not only troubled her self-identity as an "insider," but they negatively impacted on the level of collaboration accorded by female victims in the study. [9]

Indeed, being an insider is a far more complicated status with diverse impacts on the research process (GANGA & SCOTT, 2006). Some scholars even treat the possibility of achieving insider identities with considerable skepticism. In a review essay of the book "Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler" (edited by David WEAVER-ZERCHER), EPPLEY (2006) demonstrates that becoming a complete insider is often impossible even though the researcher may share many subject positions with participants. She adds that the status of a complete insider is often unachievable within the scope of fieldwork since some level of objectivity, abstraction and distancing is required to conduct rigorous research. In much the same way, researchers cannot declare themselves absolute outsiders since one can always find some shared subject position with participants, not least mutual acquaintance (EPPLEY, 2006; GANGA & SCOTT, 2006). In fact, many

researchers rarely assume an absolute outsider position when doing fieldwork, particularly when they access respondents through referral (WEBER, 2001). [10]

There is thus no absolute insider or absolute outsider status which researchers model their fieldwork practice on. Many reflexive fieldwork accounts convincingly illustrate that both the "insider" and "outsider" statuses are neither simply granted nor achieved; they are very fluid constructions (EPPLEY, 2006; MURRAY, 2003; PALMER, 2006; SONI-SINHA, 2008; WATTS, 2006). A key insight apparent in these conversations is that fieldwork identities are discursively produced in ongoing fieldwork interactions, and they are neither stable nor coherent (BREUER & ROTH, 2002; EPPLEY, 2006). For these reasons, the term "positionality" has become the preferred notion to capture the researcher-subject relationships during fieldwork. According to Kathleen ST. LOUIS and Angela C. BARTON (2002), positionality is influenced by socio-cultural attributes such as race, color, gender, class, some of which we have little or no control over. And it denotes motion: as a relational place, it depicts one's changing social location in shifting context-specific networks of relationships (ibid.). [11]

Indeed, the researcher's social location during fieldwork is influenced by a multitude of relationships between persons (EPPLEY, 2006; ST. LOUIS & BARTON, 2002). The basic form of these relationships is a tie between the researcher and a subject—the dyadic relationship. The researcher's social location during fieldwork is a relative one in the sense that it is partially or wholly constituted in relation to the positioning of active participants (EPPLEY, 2006). Whereas the researcher positions himself or herself in particular ways, he or she is simultaneously positioned by participants. In the same vein, Veronica CROSSA (2012) and Isabella NG (2011) argue that as fieldwork progresses, both the researcher and researched occupy several positions of sameness and difference. The challenge for qualitative researchers is how to leverage processes of identity and positionality in order to garner the collaboration of fieldwork participants. How and to what extent can a researcher influence the processes of identity and positionality so as to secure the collaboration of participants? These questions pinpoint a blind spot in writings about positionality during fieldwork. In the ensuing sections, I attempt to shed light on this blind spot. Before I do that, I first describe in more detail the study on which this article is based, as well as the context of fieldwork. [12]

3. The Study and the Context of Fieldwork

The study on which this article is based sought to: 1. explore how Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa, constructed and sustained notions of "belonging" and "family," and 2. examine the experiences of migrants and their families for social protection policies in the two countries (Zimbabwe and South Africa), and in a regional context of increasing cross-border migration. Theoretically, the study drew on the two perspectives of "social practice" and "transnationalism": Based on social practice, the study presumed that social life occurs within relationships between persons (THOMAS, 2005). Furthermore, social practice implies that the subject is constantly produced and reproduced in

changing and situated social relations of belonging (ROWE, 2005). Drawing on the perspective of migrant transnationalism, an important premise of the study was that social life is not "automatically and primarily organized within or between nations, states or other types of bordered and bounded social system containers" (KHAGRAM & LEVITT, 2008, p.8). Rather, social life unfolds in multi-layered social fields or sets of interconnecting networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are exchanged, organized and transformed in asymmetrical ways (LEVITT & GLICK SCHILLER, 2004). The perspective of transnationalism suggests that although contemporary migrants are located in a particular locality, they possess the ability to simultaneously embed themselves in multiple networks of social relations across borders—a process known as *simultaneous embeddedness* (ibid.). [13]

Based on these theoretical assumptions, it was insufficient, if not inappropriate, to define *belonging* in terms of citizenship, which refers to an individual's claims to membership in a political community (CHRISTENSEN, 2009). Instead, belonging was conceptualized in relational terms to capture participants' "desire for some sort of *attachment*, be it to other people, places or modes of being" (PROBYN, 1996, p.19). Thus, unlike citizenship frameworks which conceive migrants as *rights-bearing individuals*, the notion of belonging adopted in this study emphasized social interactions and quotidian practices, as well as situated forms of collective identification sustained among migrants and non-migrants (see CHERENI, 2014 for a detailed description of the research design). Where studies underpinned by citizenship frameworks view belonging as a more individuated experience, the current study defined it as a contingent and collective experience (ibid.). Thus, prior to fieldwork I already positioned fieldwork participants as interactants and relational subjects, rather than disconnected individuals. [14]

Since belonging was conceived of as a contingent and collective experience, it was appropriate to focus on conventional collective units which emerge out of every day practices of Zimbabwean migrants. In line with Florence WEBER's (2001) insights on studying collectives, I included Zimbabwean migrants who were already in relationships prior to fieldwork. On the basis of these theoretical presuppositions, the "Forward in Faith Mission International" (FIFMI)—a transnational Pentecostal formation with origins in Zimbabwe—was chosen after a period of reconnaissance lasting for about three months. FIFMI is the transnational version of "Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa" (ZAOGA), a born again movement which emerged in Zimbabwe's colonial townships in the 1950s (MAXWELL, 2006). In Johannesburg, FIFMI has a large following of Zimbabweans and a negligible portion of non-Zimbabweans. Furthermore, during reconnaissance, I learnt that the FIFMI largely entrusts the Zimbabwean clergy with the responsibility of shepherding its flock. As with the clergy, leadership positions of Elders, Deacons¹ and chairpersons of various departments in the FIFMI Ministry were held by Zimbabweans. [15]

1 Both Deacon and Elder are servant leaders of the FIFMI Ministry although the latter has more responsibility and authority.

It is thus appropriate to assert that my theoretical positionality—including assumptions about social life and the conceptualization of belonging—gave rise to a theoretically-driven ethnography in which theoretical beliefs provided a vague starting point for drawing the boundaries of fieldwork (RAGIN, 1992; TAVORY & TIMMERMANS, 2009). In order to capture constructions and practices of belonging among migrants, it was necessary that I assumed insider positions as much as possible. Accordingly, I immersed myself in the flow and rhythm of two FIFMI congregations in Central Johannesburg known as the City Christian Centre Assembly and Berea Assembly. This enabled me to observe congregants' quotidian practices and social relations (CHERENI, 2014; McCALL, 2006). In addition, I used key informant interviews and in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected migrants and their non-migrant counterparts in Zimbabwe (KVALE, 2007). Thus the study adopted a multi-sited fieldwork approach which followed the social relations of migrants across the Zimbabwe-South African border (BURRELL, 2009; NADAI & MAEDER, 2005). Since this article uses various encounters which occurred during fieldwork, it is considered unnecessary to describe data collection in detail (for a comprehensive description of data collection, see CHERENI, 2014). [16]

However, a more detailed description of the sending and destination countries is relevant. Spatially, a contiguous border sets South Africa apart from Zimbabwe, lowering transport costs for potential migrants. This allows for migrants to crossover from Zimbabwe into South Africa with relative ease, even without authentic travel documents (MAKINA, 2010). Economic disparities also create a gulf between the two neighboring countries. For example, South Africa is arguably the largest economy in Africa, and a member of BRICS², an economic group of growing middle economies (YANSHUO, 2011). On the contrary, Zimbabwe's economic performance dwindled to unprecedented lows in the third decade of the country's independence, resulting in mass unemployment; the highest inflation rate ever recorded in the world and widespread food shortages, amongst other woes (KINSEY, 2010; RAFTOPOULOS, 2009). Since the early 2000s, migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa has increased in response to extreme economic hardships and a violent internal political crisis in Zimbabwe (MAKINA, 2010). [17]

Located just over 500 kilometers from the Zimbabwe/South Africa border, Johannesburg is a vast city region, perhaps the biggest cosmopolitan city on the continent (SEGBERS, 2007). Unlike other cities in the country, Johannesburg is host to the largest and most diverse constituency of Zimbabweans, including undocumented migrants without skills and highly professional elite migrants (MAKINA, 2010). Most Zimbabweans initially plan to live in Johannesburg for short periods of time before returning to Zimbabwe, or move on to a third country. However, largely due to economic reasons, many end up living in Johannesburg for longer periods (LANDAU, 2010). [18]

2 BRICS is named after its national members: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

In what follows, I revisit my own interactions with Zimbabwean migrants whilst conducting fieldwork in Johannesburg in order to tease out some insights as to how researchers might influence their positionality during research and its possible impact on both the research process and the research output. [19]

4. Field Interactions: Negotiating Entry and Working Out Identities

At the time I commenced fieldwork at the City Christian Centre and Berea Assemblies of the FIFMI in Johannesburg, I considered myself an insider (GANGA & SCOTT, 2006). To begin with, my participants and I shared a number of cultural attributes, including the Shona³ language and its idioms as well as cultural practices and beliefs. As with Kyoko SHINOZAKI's (2012) research with Filipino migrants in Germany, my participants and I hailed from the same country. Moreover, we shared at least some common positions in terms of national belonging and a collective history. Most importantly, I was part of the FIFMI's flock: I had crossed floors from Methodist Protestantism to ZAOGA's Pentecostalism two years prior to fieldwork. Hence my participants and I shared more points of sameness in terms of religious practices. Like most of the congregants, I was well-versed in the history of FIFMI, its liturgical order, Pentecostal belief system and practices of worship. Given these common attributes, including ethnic national belonging and religious belonging, I assumed that an immediate bond of kinship would emerge at the onset of fieldwork. [20]

4.1 Gaining and sustaining access to field sites

The subsequent discussion builds on two sets of critical moments or events (HALQUIST & MUSANTI, 2010; MOSSELSON, 2010) which emerged during reconnaissance in May 2009. The first set of critical events relates to my encounter and interactions with James Tembo⁴ (30 years old), one of my key informants during fieldwork. I first spoke to Tembo at the City Christian Centre Assembly after a Sunday service. During this service, Tembo had played the role of the Master of Ceremony. He struck me as an educated migrant living in South Africa legally. Like Kyoko SHINOZAKI (2012), I anticipated that Tembo and I shared many subject positions apart from national belonging. This was confirmed during our first conversation: I learned that Tembo and I were not only age mates, but also members of the University of Zimbabwe alumni. In subsequent conversations, I shared more information about my experiences at the University of Zimbabwe up to the time I relocated to South Africa to commence my Doctorate. In doing so, I was negotiating entry by deliberately claiming positions of sameness between Tembo and myself (NG, 2011). Thus, decisions regarding what kind of information to share with participants constitute an essential aspect of bargaining access to the field (BONDY, 2012). [21]

Indeed, Tembo recognized various points of sameness between us. When I informed him of my intentions to conduct research at the City Christian Centre

3 The native language or vernacular of the Bantu people of Zimbabwe.

4 All names of participants and certain places are anonymized.

and Berea Assemblies, he not only displayed a deep understanding of the research process, but also shared his own experiences of conducting organizational research for his Honors Degree in business management. Thus, it came as no surprise when he offered to help me obtain the permission required from the church leadership to conduct the study. [22]

As part of his efforts to facilitate my access to the FIFMI, Tembo wrote an introductory e-mail to 16 other members of the congregation. It read as follows:

"Good Morning

There is a gentleman in our church who is doing a research ... I have proposed your names for his study. If you are interested may you kindly confirm ...

I kindly request your support [to enable] our [son] to carry out his studies" [23]

As evidenced in the correspondence above, Tembo played an advocacy role in which he ascribed to me the status of a respectable insider and down-played my researcher identity, even as he accentuated my credentials as a "gentleman" worthy of the congregants' attention. Furthermore, he referred to me as "our son" deserving of help from co-nationals in South Africa. Throughout fieldwork, Tembo played the role of a useful gatekeeper whose efforts were aimed at "legitimizing my presence in co-national social circles and events" (BOCCAGNI, 2011, p.740). [24]

Nevertheless, as existing fieldwork accounts suggest, just as insider research accentuates points of sameness, it equally illuminates social divisions. Deianira GANGA and Sam SCOTT (2006) have named this aspect of insider research as "diversity in proximity" to underscore the fact that an insider status does not immediately lead to better access to data. Nothing is more revealing about this point than the response I got from would-be interviewees and church leadership regarding access to the FIFMI as a field. Despite Tembo's efforts to present me as an insider to potential interviewees, only one person out of the 16 confirmed participation five days after the e-mail was sent out. In addition, I waited over three months for the body of Elders and the Clergy to grant me permission to observe Church events for research purposes. [25]

Following this dismissive response, I attended another Sunday service at the City Christian Centre Assembly. My primary intention was to introduce my study to some of the potential interview participants in person. Soon after the Pastor had said grace to signal the end of the Sunday service, I approached Tongai Gomo (45 years old), one of the addressees of Tembo's introductory e-mail, and started a conversation about my research. In response, Gomo acknowledged receipt of the e-mail but quickly expressed his reservations about participating in the study. He was concerned that he might reveal sensitive information about his family and other migrants during the interview. In addition, he pointed out that such information could fall into the hands of South Africa's government functionaries who have authority to arrest and deport foreigners. Gomo further revealed that he was a regular migrant, as were his wife and three children. However, he knew many congregants who had illegally entered into the country and acquired

permits through bribery and forgery. Such persons, he informed me, were more vulnerable to raids and investigations that were routinely conducted by South African government officials. Gomo further indicated that his involvement in the study could compromise the church's reputation in the event that congregants were targeted by immigration officials on the basis of information accessed during fieldwork. [26]

Upon reflection, my interactions with gatekeepers during fieldwork corroborate the idea that access to insider narratives is continuously negotiated (BONDY, 2012). This is so, because, as Veronica CROSSA (2012) argues, there is always a state of "betweenness" or difference that the researcher must navigate throughout fieldwork. I realized that I was naïve to assume that my participants and I shared common experiences as migrants in South Africa, automatically ensuring that my participants trusted me. My position as a legal migrant in South Africa varied markedly from irregular migrants who faced a much higher risk of arrest and deportation. Hence, Gomo's fears were not unfounded. In fact, as NG (2011) observes, fieldwork interactions are hardly apolitical. The South African government is well-known for dealing with irregular migrants in a high-handed manner: this includes use of highly resourced border control and internal monitoring units empowered to track, identify, intercept, remove and deport illegal migrants from the territory (LANDAU, 2010; WALLER, 2006). In fact, South Africa's post-apartheid immigration policy is based on a control ethos: state practices in the area of migration are geared toward letting in skilled migrants only, while keeping out those prospective movers who do not possess skills that are in demand in the country (DODSON, 2008). Therefore, as BONDY (2012) notes, the manner in which people and social institutions deal with particular issues, for example, membership and access to secure residence, has a considerable impact on the researcher's continued access to the field. My interactions with gatekeepers further strengthen the view that the researcher's agency—which, for example, plays out through the way by which he or she claims and assumes certain identities—is constrained by particular social conditions, such as a people's history, collective struggles, and obligations and norms of reciprocity among participants, which are unique to a specific field (HENRY, 2007). [27]

During the conversation with Gomo, he asked: "Are you aware that we [Church Leaders] allowed a researcher to conduct a study of the Church and" I found myself quickly interjecting as I knew where the conversation was heading: "You mean that White Professor ...?" Elder Gomo nodded his head as if he was relieved that I knew something about MAXWELL's research. I interpreted the mention of his research as an ethically critical moment (MOSELSON, 2010). This situation presented an opportunity for acknowledging and negotiating both the difference and power inequality between myself and participants. It helped to enhance trust, collaboration and access to data as well as the ethical integrity of my research. Although MAXWELL, a professor of African History, did an extensive ethnography of ZAOGA-FIFMI which culminated in a book publication (MAXWELL, 2006), Church leaders commonly regard his work as a misrepresentation of the FIFMI. They contend that MAXWELL's ethnographic

account of the FIFMI openly criticized the leadership style of ZAOAGA-FIFMI's spiritual leader—Ezekiel GUTI. Moreover, some church leaders contend that David MAXWELL branded ZAOAGA-FIFMI a religious *sect* when it should be considered a Church ordained by God. [28]

In my view, MAXWELL's representation of ZAOAGA-FIFMI drew on a prolonged fieldwork; it is not a polemic. Nevertheless, resolving the issue of his research was critical for addressing broader issues of power imbalances between myself and the participants, and to open up access to the field (CROSSA, 2012). On reflection, my reference to him as "that White Professor ..." was a futile attempt to gain access. It was a bargain made in the heat of the moment: my naïve intention was to depict MAXWELL as an outsider while accentuating my own credentials as a congregant, co-national, and a cultural insider. Perhaps, because biological and cultural attributes alone rarely determine a researcher's acceptance as an insider (ALCALDE, 2007), Gomo successfully "delineated and established my researcher role ... as an outsider" (PALMER, 2006, p.473), akin to MAXWELL's. Thus, just as I claimed strategic identities through my engagements with other field actors, participants similarly negotiated their multiple identities (CROSSA, 2012). [29]

The recollection of critical encounters during reconnaissance further underscores the point that there are no authentic identities in qualitative field research, neither are there fixed notions of self (HENRY, 2007). Even when a researcher claims authentic insider positions, his or her "version of self" is "continually questioned and re-interpreted" (p.75) by participants. In my case, Gomo and other gatekeepers not only questioned my claims to insider positions; they engaged in processes of boundary-drawing (SHINOZAKI, 2012) through discursive strategies meant to emphasize my credentials as a researcher, rather than a congregant and cultural insider. Especially during the first few months of fieldwork, many congregants at City Christian Centre and Berea Assemblies emphasized my institutional role as a researcher in order to ascribe to me an outsider identity and to exclude me from their circles. Thus, as GEE observes, research identities are rarely constructed outside "the discourse or dialogue of other people" (2001, p.103). My experience of negotiating access to the field clearly exemplifies GEE's argument that, "when any human being acts and interacts in a given context, others recognize that person as acting and interacting as a certain 'kind of person' or even as several different 'kinds' at once" (p.99). [30]

Thus far, my story underscores the point that although the researcher may share several subject positions with participants, there is an unavoidable state of difference which the researcher must address in order to gain and maintain access to the field. In the remainder of the article, I reflect on some of the strategies which I employed in order to secure informants' collaboration and to access their internal viewpoints. The subsequent sections support the view that unless the researcher successfully mobilizes informants to recognize him as a certain kind of person, his or her self-identity may remain a mere claim to membership of the participants' group. [31]

4.2 Cracking the tough nuts: situated strategies for achieving collaboration

4.2.1 *Trying to discover what is at stake for informants*

From my encounter with Gomo, I learnt that "trying to discover what is 'at stake' for the people one studies" (MATTINGLY, 2005, p.460) is an essential part of negotiating access to information during fieldwork. Gomo might have mentioned the possible government crackdown on migrants and the FIFMI's prior experiences with MAXWELL in order to genuinely illustrate the possible harm to study participants. Furthermore, Gomo might have been apprehensive of the power imbalances between me and the participants, especially during the writing process (SHINOZAKI, 2012): I realized that, like Gomo, many FIFMI congregants knew that collaboration hardly extended beyond fieldwork, and that as informants they had relatively little influence on the texts the researcher produces (BOCCAGNI, 2011). [32]

According to BONDY (2012), the researcher needs to negotiate multiple bargains throughout fieldwork in order to maintain access to the field. My fieldwork experiences strengthen this observation: in one way or another, they all demonstrate that identifying what matters to research participants is necessary for striking timely bargains. Moreover, as with BONDY's study, the way I dealt with differences during data collection illustrates that fieldwork bargains are negotiated "based on an understanding of expectations of behavior within the research site" (p.582). In my case, the bargain was to assure Gomo that, unlike MAXWELL (2006), I was not concerned with interrogating the theological status of the FIFMI. Neither was I interested in questioning its liturgical aspects. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to concede that exploring the Pentecostal liturgical practices, leadership squabbles and controversies pertaining to Church administration could have been interesting for my research since the realm of the officially sacred and the secular sphere are often indistinct (KONG, 2001). Still, the theological aspects and administrative leadership issues of the FIFMI were peripheral to my research question. As already noted, my study sought to explore how Zimbabwean migrants (congregants) constructed and sustained notions of *belonging* (CHERENI, 2014). [33]

It is true that power imbalances exist between the author and research participants when it comes to the process of authoring a research report. During fieldwork, I took care to acknowledge the limits of collaboration by emphasizing the requirement to write-up the findings in academic discourse, and adhering to specific procedures and ethics. As with my encounter with Gomo, I pledged to circulate a draft of the report to all interested study participants whenever my interlocutors raised the issue of writing-up findings. In this way, I fairly managed to strike timely bargains while under-playing my outsider-researcher identity. [34]

During observations of the Sunday service, many congregants with whom I interacted at City Christian Centre and Berea Assemblies seemed to be aware that something continued to set me apart from them. Like myself, many congregants used their smart phones and cameras to take a snap-shot or shoot

an amateur video of a guest preacher on the podium. Yet unlike them, I used my camera and digital voice recorder more systematically at every Sunday service which I attended. On various occasions, different congregants initiated a conversation with a question which I came to anticipate throughout data collection: "Exactly what are you looking for?" Surely, such inquiries signified a continuous boundary between myself and other congregants. Yet I read such encounters as ethically critical moments that could enhance openness and trust between myself and the participants (HENRY, 2007; MOSSELSO, 2010). Hence, throughout fieldwork, I made it a point to inform my interlocutors what my study was *not* about: questioning or validating the FIFMI's liturgical order, including its beliefs and practices of worship, and the spirituality of its congregants. On most occasions, many congregants showed genuine empathy, often inquiring whether I was getting what I was looking for, and promising to help. Indeed, there were moments I shared similar insider positions with my participants. Very often, such moments emerged from bargains whereby the concerns of field participants were timely addressed. [35]

Whereas occupying insider positions was necessary due to the nature of the research question, in practice, achieving complete insider statuses during fieldwork was impossible (HENRY, 2007). The frequent questions about what I was looking for during observations provided opportunities for allaying informants' anxieties and enhancing genuine collaboration. Yet at times I interpreted such questioning as something of a boundary-drawing exercise (SHINOZAKI, 2012) whereby participants emphasized the differences between the researcher and other field actors during fieldwork. Another issue which raised doubts as to whether my claims to group membership were genuinely recognized was the way in which some participants expressed their admiration for my embarking on a doctorate in social work. They highlighted the sophistication, mental power and discipline which this academic undertaking requires. Although I was careful to play down my status as a post-graduate researcher, I realized that participants acknowledged my authority to observe and interpret behaviors in natural settings, and to create the kind of text acceptable in academic circles. This factor continued to set me apart from my participants throughout fieldwork. Therefore, as with other qualitative researchers, power asymmetries continued to set me apart from my participants throughout fieldwork despite the fact that many had accepted my presence in their social lives (CROSSA, 2012; HENRY, 2007; NG, 2011). [36]

4.2.2 *Fitting in*

Unless combined with other tactics, trying to make sense of what is at stake for participants during research may not bring about useful collaboration. As shown above, this strategy was not effective in adequately addressing the issues of power inherent in the researcher/participant relationship. The second tactic which I adopted involved inserting myself into the social fabric of the FIFMI religious community at City Christian Centre and Berea Assemblies. I sought to assume established identity categories within the FIFMI community at the two Assemblies and performing them during fieldwork. In the first few months of fieldwork at both

City Christian Centre and Berea Assemblies, congregants often greeted me in Shona in a manner that sought clarification:

Congregant: *Mhoroi. Toti baba here kana mukoma?* [Greetings. Should I call you brother or father?]

Researcher: *Mukoma. Mhoroi!* [Brother. Greetings!] [37]

Congregants regularly asked whether they should recognize me as a brother (*mukoma*) or a father (married man) during the first few months of fieldwork. At first I thought that congregants were insinuating that I had taken too long to settle down. Nevertheless, as my fieldwork progressed, I appreciated that many congregants found it difficult to place me in one of the local categories from merely judging my appearance. When I commenced fieldwork, I was in my late 20s. By then, most of my age mates in the FIFMI congregation were already married; those who made time to participate in FIFMI's many fellowship and planning meetings had already achieved leadership statuses. Some were Deacons, others were Elders and still others were coordinators of ministries. I viewed conversations related to my marital status as an opportunity to find my own place within the social life of the FIFMI religious community. Hence I conveniently accepted the identity category of a young unmarried man: identity categories of a single, unmarried young man or woman were characterized by a number of behavioral expectations such as participating in a number of church youth activities and making financial contributions when required to do so. In order to maintain my place among the congregants, I participated in such activities whenever I had time and contributed as much money as my student allowance permitted. [38]

But, I learnt that at times, some of the Church's expectations of a church youth member conflicted with my role as a researcher. For instance, the FIFMI teachings discouraged two single youths of the opposite sex from having a meeting in the absence of a "third party"—preferably another member of the youth or an Elder. This is one requirement I failed to uphold. One afternoon, a female friend of mine with whom I regularly discussed my fieldwork experiences asked me to join her for coffee. We agreed to meet at a cafeteria situated in a big shopping mall in Northern Johannesburg. In the middle of our conversation, Gomo and his wife—both of whom were presumably shopping for household groceries—walked straight to our table and greeted me. Then Gomo's wife observed in a sincere tone of voice: "Brother ... We haven't seen you at church for a while now." While this might have been an expression of a genuine longing for fellowship, I deduced that the couple's formalities were prompted by my having coffee with a patron of the opposite sex. Throughout the short conversation, I felt awkward introducing my female friend and explaining why I had been absent for a couple of Sunday services. [39]

FIFMI Church Elders and Deacons assume the role of the shepherd designed to guide and prepare the youth members for family life. Considering this, Gomo and his wife had not crossed the line that day when they reminded me that I had

skipped several Church services. Performing the identity of a young, unmarried single man meant that throughout fieldwork, I tolerated being scrutinized and monitored by church leaders even when this was done outside the context of church meetings. Moreover, I deliberately deferred to Elders, Deacons and other married men, always presenting myself as one who is willing to receive advice. For example, during fieldwork, it was not uncommon for an Elder to ask me, "Brother ... When do you plan to get married?" Questions about my marital status often led to long conversations in which my interlocutors encouraged me to "settle down." From their viewpoint, such questions were justified since I was a single man in his late 20s—a much older age for a typical youth member. Thus, as ROWE (2005) observed in her essay about belonging and relationships, behavioral expectations in the FIFMI community formed one of the "different layers that constitute identity categories" which I had assumed (p.39). In other words, I could not sufficiently claim insider identities without meeting such expectations. [40]

Nonetheless, it is important to note that although claiming and enacting insider identities helped to destabilize the boundaries between self and other in ways that strengthened collaboration and ethical integrity of research, this posed some dilemmas and challenges: on a few occasions during fieldwork, my access to field sites was threatened due to the assumed insider identities of a youth member and unmarried congregant. For example, at one Sunday service that was exclusively organized for married congregants, known as the "Couples' Fellowship," organizers denied me entry on the basis that I was a youth member of the FIFMI. Various aspects of family life that were relevant to my research study, including the issue of enhancing fidelity in a transnational context as well as aspects of fathering and mothering, were deliberated in the Couples' Fellowship. In order to gain access to observe this event, I underscored my identity as a researcher and argued that it was necessary that I observe the event. [41]

Upon reflection, my fieldwork experience suggests that being accountable for one's social position (ROWE, 2005) is indispensable not only for sustaining insider positions and genuine collaboration, but also for enhancing the ethical integrity of the research. Eliciting recognition for my insider status from congregants depended as much on my meeting their expectations of me as a youth church member, as remaining accountable to church leaders. Therefore, by trying to "fit in" the rank and file of the FIFMI, I was inevitably "cut down to size" (BECKER, BOONZAIER & OWEN, 2005, p.127). Stated otherwise, through achieving and assuming insider identities, and by being accountable for one's social position, the researcher yields a considerable amount of influence over fieldwork dynamics to participants (HENRY, 2007; REEVES, 2010). To a larger degree, this loss of influence is necessary for addressing the difference between the researcher and research participants. As illustrated above, participants used the discursive space created by fieldwork interactions to enforce FIFMI Pentecostal doctrine and expected codes of behavior. This is what Florence WEBER (2001) meant when she wrote:

"Fieldwork is not an action performed (by the researcher) on passive respondents: it is a 'vast chain of interdependences' ... which lasts for the duration of the study, which starts off in a particular manner (the initial stages are decisive) and follows its own dynamic" (p.483). [42]

In retrospect, I believe that such a loss of influence during fieldwork is not necessarily a negative occurrence. Rather, enabling informants to gain influence over the research dynamics is central to achieving collaboration during fieldwork as well the ethical integrity of the research. [43]

4.2.3 Cultivating close ties

Another strategy which I employed in order to build collaboration with congregants entailed investing considerable and sustained effort in "cultivating close ties with others" rather than just striving for "distance and detachment" as in other studies (MONAHAN & FISHER, 2010, p.357). During fieldwork, I attended a number of sociability events. These included church dinners, various outings, *braai* parties⁵ and social soccer tournaments. Cultivating ties also involved responding to occasional friendly calls, text messages and e-mails from fellow congregants who wished to encourage me to remain steadfast in prayer or just to greet me. I found that reciprocating these friendly gestures reduced the social distance between me and participants. Occasionally, I telephoned some of the participants to greet or congratulate them. Sometimes, I chatted with a number of congregants on Facebook and other social networking sites. Through these interactions I intended to become part of the group as much as possible. [44]

Nonetheless, I discovered that in some isolated cases, cultivating proximity required that I did not conceal my professional authority as a social worker practitioner. For instance, during fieldwork, I supported a fellow youth member who was nursing a heartbreak or an Elder who had lost his job. A number of congregants viewed me as a source of career guidance, particularly post-graduate studies and jobs. To these congregants, I provided professional support and practical guidance. Thus, accepting my professional authority among co-nationals and striving to "transcend writing and academia" through making "useful contributions to the local community" (ALCALDE, 2007, p.152) brought me closer to the participants, and ensured their collaboration in data collection. [45]

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I have used my own experiences of doing fieldwork among co-nationals in South Africa to illustrate that oscillating between multiple identities and insider positions helps the researcher address the inevitable difference and power imbalance between him/her and other fieldwork actors. As a result of such agency (negotiating multiple identities during fieldwork) openness, trust and collaboration between the researcher and participants are enhanced. And yet my fieldwork experiences equally underscore the fact that the researcher's agency is

5 Social gatherings or parties held outside at which meat is cooked over an open flame.

situated in specific relational and political contexts; it is almost always constrained by social conditions and embedded practices unique to the field (BONDY, 2012; HENRY, 2007). A pertinent issue that this article underscores is GEE's (2001) notion of identity as "being recognized as a certain kind of person" (p.99). Thinking of identity in this way helps to show that self-attributions of the researcher-as-participant (McCALL, 2006) may remain nothing more than a claim to membership of the group one studies, in the absence of corresponding recognition from participants. My recollections in this article confirm that insider self-identities are validated through interactions, dialogue and discourse with other fieldwork actors. [46]

The researcher needs to be aware of the social conditions in the field and use this information to continuously strike bargains as a way to enlist the collaboration of participants (BONDY, 2012). Such bargains may take the form of a give-and-take negotiation where the researcher might be compelled to meet certain behavioral expectations in order to remain there (CROSSA, 2012). It is not impossible that the terms of the bargaining processes may create dilemmas and challenges as well as opportunities for the researcher, all of which may lead to further bargains. Thus as HENRY (2007) argues, the researcher's agency—for example, oscillating between various identities—as well as his or her trajectory in the field are both transformed by various terms of bargaining. This point echoes BOCCAGNI's (2011) observation that ethnographic research is a process which is partially driven by the "opportunities (and constraints) met in fieldwork" (p.744). Consequently, none of the researcher's identities may be considered final; they are in constant flux. Importantly, they emerge out of multiple flexible relations of power (CROSSA, 2012). [47]

The need for continuous negotiation emphasized in this article implies that the bargaining processes may lead to the acknowledgment of power inequalities between field actors, thereby enhancing the ethical integrity of the research. Arguably, the continuous negotiation that is evident in the way researchers navigate multiple subject positions during fieldwork may lead to a rigorous research process (NG, 2011). Yet conducting research in this manner suggests that the researcher's presence influences the construction of knowledge (BREUER & ROTH, 2003). [48]

Moreover, it is pertinent to reiterate that embedded social practices influence the researcher's efforts to enlist and sustain genuine collaboration (BONDY, 2012). The article has shown that my identities during fieldwork, for example, as a researcher and youth member of the FIFMI, were shaped by the "opportunities and contingencies" (BOCCAGNI, 2011, p.744) of doing research among co-nationals and co-religionists. To add, my field insider identities were shaped in unique discursive fieldwork spaces in which I had little or no control of the dynamics (WEBER, 2001). Throughout fieldwork I inhabited numerous spatial and relational spaces, each illuminating different aspects of my identity (LAPUM, 2008). My findings thus emerge from a distinct social dynamic: both the data collected and the interpretations thereof reflect the combination of interactions of unique positionalities of various fieldwork actors, and the underlying social

conditions in the field (SHINOZAKI, 2012). The kind of knowledge which my participants and I generated therefore equates to a situated reality (GANGA & SCOTT, 2006). [49]

Be that as it may, my fieldwork generated some insights for other researchers doing fieldwork in their ethno-national communities:

- trying to make sense of what informants stand to lose when they participate in one's research is important for negotiating insider identities;
- endorsing participants' cultural values and religious beliefs could help a researcher earn the trust of gatekeepers during fieldwork;
- acknowledging the limits of collaboration increases the trust between the researcher and gatekeepers;
- trying to occupy established social locations within the group or community one studies and to meet the group's expectations of those locations may facilitate one's insider positioning. Moreover, being accountable for one's social locations during fieldwork might be "a vehicle that gestures toward belonging" (ROWE, 2005, p.22), thereby strengthening the researcher's insider positioning;
- making practical contributions to the group or community one studies could help the researcher to reduce the social distance between him-/herself and informants (ALCALDE, 2007). [50]

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