


Reflections from Cross-Gender Fieldwork Experiences in Open Markets in Ghana

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Abstract

Fieldwork can be an enjoyable academic adventure producing lifelong experiences of excitement and a sense of academic accomplishment. However, it can be an equally frustrating undertaking, especially when carried out in ‘unfamiliar’ environments. This paper adds to the growing number of studies about fieldworkers’ experiences by reflecting on the complexities involved in the process and proffering ways to respond to them. We share our perspectives as three adult African males conducting research in a predominantly female space in two informal markets in Accra, Ghana. To do this, we engage with five issues related to fieldwork: preparing to enter the field; negotiating access; handling interviews; dealing with ethical dilemmas; and exiting the field. We found that being male is not a barrier to conducting research in a predominantly female space. The success of our fieldwork was a product of our ability to adapt, be creative, appreciate our inadequacies, learn quickly and also take some practical and common-sense steps. Our hope is that the insights shared in this paper will serve as a compass for prospective fieldworkers.

Keywords

fieldwork, research site, negotiating access, ethics, informal markets, sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to highlight and add to the limited, but growing number of studies that share fieldworkers’ experiences by reflecting on the complexities involved in the process and suggesting ways to respond to them. Fieldwork within the social sciences constitutes a ‘rite of passage’ and an exercise that bestows authority and legitimacy on academics (Van Maanen, 2011). In addition, fieldwork ‘builds a sense of community among those who have survived/thrived’ (Sunberg, 2003: 180). While fieldwork can be fraught with difficulties, it nonetheless presents opportunities that extend the frontiers of knowledge. For researchers interested in fieldwork in the Global South, challenges in the field can be more complicated and pronounced (Greene, 2014; McFarlane-Morris, 2019; Yacob-Haliso, 2019). For example, based on recent fieldwork in Jamaica, McFarlane-Morris (2019: 6) laments that ‘many researchers, especially those from the Global South, do not publish their fieldwork experiences so that upcoming researchers can learn from them’. The field lessons contained in this paper are drawn from research

conducted in Madina and Nima open informal markets in Ghana.

The fieldwork was carried out by a team of three Ghanaian males, each with tertiary level education, and an appreciable amount of fieldwork experience spanning at the minimum 10 years. Each one of us originate from three different ethnic groups in Ghana, namely, Akan, Ewe, and Dagomba. Taken together, we possessed social and cultural capital prior to the study which we leveraged on in the course of the fieldwork. Two of us have been involved in voluntary work with a local

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NGO in the Nima community for over 5 years prior to the study. Additionally, one of us lives in the Madina community and has friends and relatives in the market who he regularly visits, making him familiar with the local market. What we seek to do here is to share our experience from the field, with the hope that it can benefit others – both theoretically and practically in appreciating the multifaceted connection between gender and research.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a description of the research site. In the third section, we explain how we approached the research *through exiting the research site to enter it*. These reconnaissance visits were made to explore some of the opportunities and challenges in the field and how best researchers could prepare to negotiate access and deal with issues arising out of them. Then, we turn our attention to the complexities of field observations and handling interviews. In the fourth part, we engage with ethical issues we encountered and then followed in the penultimate section by our views on exiting the field and afterwards. The paper concludes with some remarks on insider-outsider dynamics and also points to some areas of potential research interest on gender in fieldwork.

Our Research Sites: Nima and Madina Markets

The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was conducted in two open informal markets (Madina and Nima) in Accra, Ghana. Open informal markets have been a prominent feature of African societies and are relevant for several academic disciplines. Our original study sought to understand women's access to these market spaces, how they operate, and the broader meanings they attach to these markets/spaces (see Sowatey et al., 2018). The two markets we studied are located in the Madina and Nima communities in Accra. Nima is older and emerged as a residential community around the 1940s (Sowatey & Atuguba, 2014), and Madina was created in the 1950s as an off-shoot of Nima by a group of residents who relocated from Nima to Madina. However, Ntewusu (2020:369) posits that 'What is known today as Madina existed several years before its re-naming in the 1950s'.

Thus, the communities share similar socioeconomic and historical characteristics and are categorized by the Ghanaian state as low-income and densely populated urban communities (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). Although southern Ghana is predominantly Christian (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013), there are *zongo* communities such as Nima and Madina where Muslims are the majority population. The two communities were established by mostly Muslim migrants from different countries in West Africa including Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria making them ethnically and religiously diverse. Nima is located about 8 km north of Accra's Central Business District and Madina is approximately 16 km from the city

centre. In both Nima and Madina communities, illiteracy and unemployment are relatively high compared to most other communities in Accra (Sowatey et al., 2018). Roughly about 33% of residents in Madina are engaged in home-based businesses and other informal activities (Gough et al., 2003), and 54% of Nima residents are involved in self-employment or informal activities (Owusu et al., 2008).

Informal markets in Ghana, as in other parts of Africa, are largely female-dominated spaces (Darkwah, 2002), although there are also male dominated enclaves which are in many ways inseparable from the female section. These include such masculine domains like long distance transport drivers, butchers and so forth. The two markets operate both as retail and wholesale trading spaces, where traders buy and sell food produce and other items defined and governed by a trust based system. The reason is simple – yet complex; a significant proportion of transactions are executed on credit basis without the use of collaterals. Thus, traders procure goods on credit to sell and pay back the amount at an agreed time. Most traders try to honour this arrangement due to the fact that if an individual's reputation is ruined, its impact on their business can be dire. The reason is that others will likely no longer lend to such defaulters. In certain contexts, new comers into the system are generally welcomed based on the recommendation of trusted friends or acquaintances who vouch for their credit worthiness and reputation.

Access to different market spaces is another major issue which varies but it is generally based on family links, political connections (Bob-Milliar & Obeng-Odoom, 2011), and market brokers (for details on access, see Sowatey et al., 2018). For example, seeking access to sell as an ambulant trader on the pedestrian side walkway without a table is different from selling with a small table at a specific location on the same pedestrian walkway. As well, getting a shop in a shed inside the market demarcated area and at a lucrative location where patronage is high is different in some ways from gaining access to less lucrative spots. These dynamics are crucial in understanding how the market operates.

Accessing the Research Site

Reconnaissance Trips as Pretesting

The fieldwork was conducted by three males, all of whom were born and raised in Ghana. Being males, we were mindful of the possible challenges we could face in a predominantly female space and how we had to tactfully (re)negotiate and *craft* our positionalities in the course of the fieldwork (Merriam et al., 2001) in such a way that our gender would not be inhibitive. Here, when we say to '*craft our positionalities*', we do not mean 'deceive or not to deceive' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 56) but rather, how as researchers we could (re)package ourselves in response to wrong notions within ethically appropriate boundaries. Contrary to other studies (e.g. Arendell, 1997), we did not find any observable traits that

suggested that our status as educated and middle-class males was a barrier in reaching out to exclusively female research participants. This is because women of different ages who participated in the research, warmly welcomed us and engaged in lively conversations with us. In instances where they had different views on a matter, they dissented – indicating some level of agency and self-confidence and – which generally challenges the old orthodoxy that the researcher (almost invariably) holds more power over such research participants. This may be a result of multiple factors including the following: growing assertiveness of females particularly those of younger generations; fast growing urbanization and migration that are altering patriarchal cultural norms in fundamental ways, as well as continuous public education and awareness campaigns on gender issues by various government agencies, including the National Commission for Civic Education and other stake holders. All of these interventions and developments are taking place in the midst of a vibrant and expanding (social) media culture that have created an environment for (particularly young) people to contest and robustly discuss issues of injustice, unfairness, and accountability across a range of issues.

Besides, as males in a female-dominated space, we were mindful of patriarchal norms and decided to use deference in our interactions with female research participants. According to Jourdan et al. (2017: 234) deference ‘is a strategic behavior aimed at establishing and maintaining relationship with others reluctant to do so’. Specifically, deference seeks to ‘convince the recipient that the message sender is yielding, appeasing, and honouring the recipient’s position in the rank order’ (Fragale et al., 2012: 374). In this study, deference was helpful in how we engaged with research participants. Lastly, our local contextual knowledge of issues and the cumulative benefits of years of field experience all facilitated our access and cooperation from research participants. These qualities built on the cooperation and willingness of the research participants and resulted in what we describe as ‘successful fieldwork’. In our experience, the respondents ultimately made the determination whether to cooperate or not to and this determined to a large extent the success of the study.

From the beginning of our fieldwork, we had decided to take a few days to casually walk through the market on market days and non-market days with a view to obtaining a sense of the practical difficulties and opportunities we might encounter. Market days, what Hill (1966) calls market periodicity, are days where people travel from different parts of the country and the West African region to bring products to sell. These initial observations provided rich information that gave us a good sense of what issues were within our locus of control, including the time we arrived in the market, how long we stayed, the strategies to build rapport, and so forth. We also developed ideas about potential gatekeepers because although these markets (as our research sites) are open market spaces, they are in reality not open in terms of unbridled access to traders. For example, there are market and commodity queens

and other brokers whose formal and informal ‘permissions’ are required to facilitate smooth access and cooperation by potential research participants. Without their support and approval, fieldwork in these market spaces could be jeopardized by such gatekeepers; for instance, they could instruct or suggest to traders not to cooperate with researchers and their influence can carry weight. Indeed, some research participants asked us if we had sought the permission of their commodity queen before coming to them. Thus, initial permission from market queens was helpful in facilitating access to the research participants. We shall return to this issue of gatekeepers in a more detailed manner later in the paper.

Through our reconnaissance trips, we appreciated the transient yet permanent nature of the market space and how specific activities and locations assumed different kinds of significance, and interactions in the course of the day, especially market days. It became all too apparent to us during our reconnaissance trips that market spaces are not a strictly defined enclave. For instance, in the market space, a shed or a stall or an open space often assumed diverse, at times temporary functions of a home, a counselling centre, and a place of refuge for mostly women among other functions. Certainly, one ethical standard cannot adequately respond to these shifting postures. Thus, the market space is fluid and assumes different meanings to different people at different times, raising in its wake different *ethically sensitive moments*. We realized that not only did we need to revise our plans to respond to contingencies but also our ethical considerations had to be flexible and adaptive to reflect appropriate responses required for each of the shifting constructs of the ‘market space’. The shifting identities of market space came with its unexpected opportunities, confusion, and challenges with each calling for some right ethical decisions. We provide some illustrations to support this point. In the market, there are, for example, Christian pastors who preach daily and exert influence over some traders on a wide range of their (life) choices. Thus, some economic decisions by these traders are largely informed by their religious persuasions and what these religious people say even if it comes across as economically illogical and irrational to a non-initiate. Along with pastors, traditional priests, Mallams and other spiritual functionaries are consulted by the same traders on varying issues. Most of the religious leaders are male and, therefore, the relationship is not gender neutral. The traders regard consultations with different religious leaders as vital in making informed decisions on critical personal issues.

It is important therefore for prospective researchers to be aware of the role religion plays in fieldwork in certain contexts. On a few occasions, interviews had to be curtailed to make room for such issues. In our experience, one needs a lot of flexibility in the time schedule for this kind of fieldwork because disruptions and unexpected opportunities often occur. This awareness is important because the shift from a market setting to a religious place requires a corresponding change in the etiquettes and ethics of a market to that of a religious

place – and the researcher must be sensitive and adjust ethical principles and protocols appropriately. Such sensitivities, in our case, went a long way to build great rapport since it partly indicated to the research participants that we were not self-centred and just interested in our data but cared about them as well. This is because these religious activities are often seen as essential part of their overall wellbeing.

The early exposure afforded by our reconnaissance trips helped us to reduce some of the potential challenges common with first-time encounters in the field. This approach we described as *stimulating the benefit of hindsight through entering a research site by ‘exiting’ it or ‘exiting’ a research site in order to enter it*. The rationale for the reconnaissance trips, consisting of 3 days of 5 hours each, is similar to that of pretesting a survey instrument. We entered, exited, and re-entered the research site as a way to pre-assess and familiarize ourselves with the complex linkages in the markets. Again, these reconnaissance visits enlightened us about the key processes and dynamics embedded in both seen and unseen socio-political relations which, as ‘outsiders’, we had not previously been particularly mindful of.

In this regard, we conceive of pretesting as a process and not an event. It is worth noting that being aware of the power constellations and struggles among different political actors and constituents in the market helped us to understand and interrogate what research participants said about city officials, infrastructure, and so on. We also appreciated the fact that informal channels are critically important and the person who introduced us as well as the avenue we used to negotiate access were important to successful fieldwork. People, or better still gatekeepers, can feel disrespected if they are not consulted. In most cases, there are different constituents in a research site and a researcher can pretend to be oblivious to these divisions, or hide under the cloak of being a naive outside researcher who is unaware of these divisions and make amends when attention is drawn to it. In other words, being an outsider offers some respite for making some mistakes. While being an outsider offers a defense mechanism that researchers can deploy within ethically appropriate contexts, this is not an honest way to handle mistakes. For example, reconciling with faction A (who may have felt disrespected for not being consulted at the inception) may make faction B (who was a friend) angry. As a result, when mistakes are made, lessons must be learned. In our case, as illustrated in the ensuing section, we looked out for signs of error over time, and found ways to adapt and remedy wrongs. Indeed, fieldwork can be complex and thus demands experience, diplomacy, and tact.

Negotiating Access

It is often taken for granted among experienced social science researchers that negotiating access for research is a complex and multi-layered process. Even after gaining formal permission, the researcher needs to build rapport with informal gatekeepers – a layer which may constitute another form of

negotiating access to participants. Gaining access requires deep contextual and local knowledge about how to combine formal and informal networks and processes (Jauregui, 2016).

Building rapport can sometimes manifest in a kind of negotiation that is similar to the art of seeking access without faking friendship (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). The rapport is thus needed to create appropriate trust between a researcher and their participants. In negotiating access to our research site, it became evident that there were subtle elements of reciprocity and trust in seeking access. In our market research, the objective was to understand the marketplace from the perspectives of traders (for details, see Sowatey et al., 2018). Our participants, the market women, similarly had their own views about what the confines of the discussions should be and what could and could not be discussed. The participants’ expectations were not always in sync with our objectives. Therefore, as the interviews unfolded, we exercised a great deal of flexibility with time, the focus of the discussion, and time spent on specific issues as well as ‘tangential’ matters. Sticking strictly to our interview guide and being mindful of our planned schedules would have meant a great deal of insensitivity and selfishness. It would also have prevented us from making unexpected findings through occasional long diversionary discussions.

There is also the issue of who introduces the researcher to participants. This seemingly insignificant observation can have a potentially debilitating effect on access. Our experience in this market study shows that how a gatekeeper is perceived in the research site, particularly by potential participants, may sometimes facilitate or inhibit access in the research process. In other words, a researcher, at least at the beginning of fieldwork, may carry some of the benefits and liabilities of those they associate with. Thus, in the field, a researcher’s already existing subjective identities interact with newly ascribed perceptions; for instance, a researcher may be seen by some market women as privileged and ignorant about reality. This view may precipitate and create visible and invisible tensions: for example, how powerful market brokers see a researcher and respond to their presence and lines of inquiries. Such issues, together with many others, can affect a researcher’s access as well as time spent in the field. In consequence, the shifting subjective identities in the field affect the positionality of a researcher which has implications for access. As a result, it is up to the researcher to be mindful of such shifting identities within different places and among different people (in our case in the market) and, where necessary, respond, repackage, and realign one’s identity and association. We were constantly conscious of being wrongly tagged. Thus, at the onset of each interview, and after every session, we tried to clear any misconception.

In simple terms, the reputation of the gatekeeper who introduces a researcher may have an effect on how the researcher is perceived – at least initially. From our experience, we concluded that the reputation of the gatekeepers may in some instances significantly affect how the gates of

communication are either opened or shut and for how long. Thus, a researcher's positionality involves many shifting variables. Sowatey and Tankebe (2019: 8) argue that a researcher's positionality is not confined to a specific identity but evolves in the field:

...during our fieldwork, how we were perceived and how we wanted police officers to regard us evolved from intruding outsiders to reasonable outsiders to outsider insiders of high standing and back to intruding outsiders'.

It is equally important to stress that how good and/or bad an individual's reputation is conceived and articulated is context-specific. Our experience shows that this awareness of the reputation of people can help researchers to position themselves to utilise the social capital, networks, and other benefits that strategic association with gatekeepers offer. At the same time, an appreciation of the likely effect of a gatekeeper's reputation can help researchers to avoid bad tags that may ruin the chances of getting access to key participants and, by extension, rich data. Two team members had networks in the Nima market prior to the study and were therefore able to identify the right names to drop at the right places, being aware that the wrong names could pose problems for access and cooperation.

The craft of *identity performance* without faking friendship presents significant ethical dilemmas which Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 56) describe as 'to deceive or not to deceive'. From the very beginning, we took the position that we would not offer information that was not required by the research participants but at the same time we were mindful not to withhold vital information regarding the research and our positionality. For instance, in Ghana, names are indicators of where one comes from. But one member of the team has a name that does not conform to this logic and this was not revealed because we did not think it made any impact on the team's responsibility to the research participants. As Fei (2019: 2) argues, 'scholars tend to shy away from disclosing the details of research procedures' but this is the reality of fieldwork. The dearth of such revelations that depict 'ethnically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) may partly account for why practical ethical dilemmas are still imperfectly understood.

Indeed, the marketplace is a very unpredictable space and potential participants may encounter unexpected raids by city authorities, in particular when one wants to gain insight into street-level views among ambulant traders and those who trade illegally by roadsides. There was one instance where a team member had to cancel his interview due to an unexpected rumour of an impending raid. Early warnings of raids are common because there are strong connections between some of the officials and the market women (and men). In other words, there are also issues of risks in the field which include serious disruptions to schedules, and by extension, additional time and financial cost. Beside unannounced raids by city

officials, the effect of disruptions caused by rains and floods make it expedient for a researcher to possess the vital qualities of flexibility and adaptability to fieldwork.

Field Observations and Handling Interviews

During our first few days in the market, we thought that the market spaces were distinct domains which points inter alia to the levels of political, social, and economic influence of those who inhabit them. Our assumptions proved true to some degree. Depending on the context, whether a trader owns a stall, a shop, a lucrative spot, or trades along the street as an ambulant trader, shows their level of socioeconomic and political influence at various levels. But when we interrogated this nexus further, we realised that it was more complex than originally considered. Initially, we had trivialised the strong bond and interdependency among these various constituents in the market. It became apparent quickly, however, that although different locations and items sold in the market may be reasonable pointers to determine the level of social, political, and economic power of traders, this is not exclusively so. Our initial observation was more of 'sight-seeing' and not 'site-seeing' and 'place-reflexivity'. We found out that although getting a new shed in Nima and Madina markets required strong social and political capital, some of those who were squatting by the roadside had stalls in the market or were employees of influential market women. Thus, conceiving the markets partly as 'social geographies' impacted on our observation and interview process. For instance, we observed that the nature and intensity of interactions differed among market users. We further observed that dealings between male commercial drivers and female traders who squat by the transport terminal or parade their items within the stations differed from the kind of daily routine communications among drivers and traders in sheds and stalls. The squatters by the transport terminals regularly had to move their items to make way for the vehicles, sometimes producing tensions and tolerance – a form of intense space-management-dialogue in the course of the day.

During our observations and interviews with the traders, we had to continually shift and reposition ourselves to make way for vehicles and other market users. Field notes are an essential part of participant observation (Emerson, et al., 2011; Creswell, 2013) but in this context, mental notes and mental 'video' were the best means to keep records. Such encounters offered us a great opportunity to observe and understand the ontological views of different constituents in the market – including their focus, priority, concerns, the nature, cooperation, and competition, among others (Liebling, 2011). At the end of each day, we held coordination meetings (either in person or by phone) to discuss our experiences and how we could improve the data collection. We also wrote down our encounters, including, how we identified and approached potential research participants, non-verbal communications, tone, commentaries from passers-by, expectations after we had

completed the interview and other fieldwork related experiences. All these gave us great insights into these markets, our own reflexivity, and our findings.

All our participants allowed us to audio record the interviews. Depending on who we were interviewing and where in the market, our audio recordings had to compete with a lot of background noise. For example, our interviews by the roadside had to compete with wooing from traders, noise and fumes from cars coupled with the heat, and the many pedestrians and other market traders who were constantly moving and jostling for space. This experience among traders, pedestrians and other road users can be both chaotic and confusing but also exciting.

In such an environment, taking critical fieldnotes was almost impossible so we were compelled to rely on mental notes and hope that our audio recordings would be audible. When we had transcribed our first interviews – which we strongly recommend people do in the field – we realized that we needed high quality recorders although these were expensive. Subsequently, we acquired more audible audio recorders but which had an impact on our budget and helped us to appreciate the need for making room for financial contingencies in fieldwork budgeting.

We started each interview by introducing ourselves and seeking the verbal consent of participants. We were not sure if all the participants really understood and appreciated the request for consent as it was undergirded by western philosophies and principles. This reignites an old debate about ‘consent’ in non-western societies with different sociolegal and cultural philosophies. We did our best to have a flexible interview schedule because flexibility is key during interviews (Bryman, 2016; Reeves, 2010). Bryman (2001: 487) believes that ‘flexibility in such areas as varying the order of the questions, following leads, and clearing up inconsistencies in answers’ are important to successful data collection. There were times that research participants took a long detour and spoke at length about issues unrelated to our inquires but which we sometimes felt that they served as a form of therapeutic effect or catharsis to these participants. Under such situations, the participants were in full control of the focus, priority, and trajectory of the interview. We did not interrupt them but listened all the way through and gradually brought them back to answer our questions – without being insensitive to their immediate concerns and primary focus of attention. These diversionaries provided valuable insights although it disrupted our schedules for the day. With time, we planned our interviews such that they were adequately spaced to accommodate such contingencies.

Oberhauser and Yeboah (2011) and McDowell (2001) argue that the site of interview has a telling effect on participants’ responses – with homes disrupting the power dynamics between researcher and research participants. Although we may not entirely deny the assertion that interview sites are also physical spaces, we also found out that interview sites can be altered to assume different meanings to

different people within different contexts and time. Thus, these variations may have impact on whether such places are suitable for public or private conversations with research participants.

From our fieldwork, we realised that sometimes an appropriate interview site *is a product of a dialogic process* between a research participant and a researcher that attempts to alter the logical sequence of an interview guide to create a comfortable space (private and public) for discussion. Hence, ‘spatial processes can be seen as co-constitutive and dialectical in nature’ (Neely & Samura, 2011: 1934). A researcher will not always have the luxury and opportunity to vary locations and move research participants around. Thus, this calls for a reflection over Elwood and Martin’s (2000: 649) view that ‘...there is NO goodplace for an interview!’

This raises an important question about what can be done where there are limited spatial options. In our fieldwork, we developed a technique, which we termed *co-dancing to create convenience*. We noticed during our interviews in different locations in the market (e.g. stalls and roadside) that some questions which we deemed sensitive were not necessarily regarded that way by some of our participants and vice versa. This means that adaptability in the field is essential. We know from our previous studies that researchers and participants must find ‘safe’ and suitable interview sites, primarily because this facilitates rich and ethically appropriate interviews (McDowell, 2001; Sin, 2003). Although in principle such advice is reasonable, we were nonetheless concerned about adhering too strictly to it, which would have posed a significant challenge to our data collection. Also, the concept of a safe space or safe research site transcends a physical location to include a sense of safety that may be fluid and contingent on prevailing circumstances, including what the interview seeks to explore, under what circumstances, and how the researcher is perceived. As a result of this awareness, we adjusted our interview guide and co-created different spaces in the market for the interviews.

During our fieldwork, the conceptualisation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ interview sites was fluid and shaped by different etiquettes and ethics. Further, the appropriate interview site could be created by altering the order of interview questions. Some researchers have highlighted the importance of building flexibility into how interview schedules are designed and used in the field (Bryman, 2001; Reeves, 2010), although none had used flexible schedule as a tool for the creation of comfortable interview sites. Ordinarily, people would alter their conversations in response to who is present or not. This is well known and commonly practised by many communities. For example, two friends could talk about sensitive issues in a public space but alter the subject when another person comes within hearing distance. The friends may decide to switch to another topic which they may consider relatively less sensitive or mundane. For us, the physical space remains the same (public) but by altering the topics, the two friends are co-constructing

different spaces (interview sites) by altering the subject of conversation.

This co-construction of appropriate situation or public environment was done through the re-ordering of the questions on the interview guide – depending on who was around. For example, when we asked sensitive questions, we needed to make sure the participant was comfortable, and not acting in certain ways, including looking over the shoulders, lowering their voice, stealing glances around, exhibiting signs of anxiety and other non-verbal communication cues that are learned over time and can be culture specific. During our interviews, when participants received visitors, which could last up to an hour, we typically stopped the interview because of confidentiality. A number of such visits were unannounced and relatively regular. But these must be understood from the Ghanaian perspective where generally, particularly in informal markets, unannounced visits are common practice. If the visitor left and another stopped by but we got a hint that the new visitor should not be made aware of our conversation, we varied the logical flow of the questions and sometimes asked other unrelated questions; for example, how does the sun impact your business? Under such conditions, we co-created a new public space that accommodated others without jeopardizing existing relationships. In truth, such visits did not only create ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 265) but they also engendered confidentially sensitive moments. To illustrate, we provide an example from our fieldnotes.

Interviewer: Maamuna (pseudonym): How is business?

Participants/Maamuna: It is well although things are not as brisk as before.

I: What accounts for this?

Maamuna: The system is difficult.

I: Is the business yours?

R: No, it’s for my madam.

I: How long have you worked with her?

Maamuna: 3 years

At this point, someone stops by to speak to Maamuna and takes a seat. Maamuna introduces her as her sister. Within the Ghanaian context, sister assumes broad meanings ranging from a childhood friend, to a neighbour, former school mate or another trader or a regular customer, a friend of a friend and so on. We asked Maamuna if we should take a break until the visitor left. Maamuna signalled for the conversation to continue because she was not providing any confidential information.

After a couple of interviews, we realised that stopping an interview when another person stopped by, in some instances, suggested mistrust. It could be translated to mean that the

participant did not trust the visitor, which could potentially strain their long-term friendship. In Maamuna’s case, although we did not stop discussing the particular subject matter – which meant that the interview site was still a public space, by varying the questions, through a subtle dialogic process we co-constructed a private setting within a public space where other people could join without feeling displaced.

With time, we realised that the place of interview, the time of the interview and people who could see and listen to the interview combined in different ways to shape the identities, roles, and positions of participants. We soon coined the phrase ‘Place without people and people without place significantly shapes identity’. Let’s try to explain this phrase: during our observations, when a ‘shop owner’ was around, shop attendants may not have the same power, identity, and position as when the ‘boss’ was not there, creating a fluid iterative process of identity formation.

Temporality also shaped power dynamics and positions. At night, the Madina market turns into a recreational place with different and new identities, and positions of power. Consequently, the power brokers of the night are different from those of the day, yet both are interconnected in ways that are relevant for a study of the market, and how time and space interact to shift and shape internal dynamics in significant ways. For instance at night, there are ‘gangs’ who rule different parts of Madina market and streets and some of these people have little or no influence on how the market operates during the day. Others also turn pavements into brisk markets where used shoes, clothes, herbal medicine and other wares are sold, thereby circumventing some of the (in)formal access restrictions and processes that apply during the day. Some places in the markets are also turned into brothels, and places of unauthorized activities. These dynamics of the temporality of the market space and how it evolves and takes on different meanings are key to gaining insight into the broader socio-economic milieu of market spaces.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues constantly arise at different phases in most social science research, ‘including data collection in the field and in analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports’ (Creswell, 2013:174). These ethical issues cannot be predicted (Bryman, 2016), and ‘[i]n real-world research, ethics are not fixed’ (Armstrong et al., 2014: 1). Based on what we learned from the field, we largely share the views of Mackenzie et al., (2007: 299), that ‘researchers should seek ways to move beyond harm minimization as a standard for ethical research, and recognize an obligation to design and conduct research projects that aim to bring about reciprocal benefits’.

Our experience in the Nima and Madina markets suggests that ethical research requirements that are prescriptive and rigid tend to find little relevance in such informal market spaces where the correctness or otherwise of ethical issues is not straightforward (Bryman, 2016). These can largely be

properly assessed and understood within situated context (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, et al., 2007). Also, adhering to ethical research practice is an ongoing, iterative process which has at its core ‘iterative models of consent’ (Mackenzie et al., 2007: 307).

Beyond this, ethical issues that arise also tend to vary depending on the kind of study, location, and culture, among others – in other words, its holistic context. But what may be seen as sensitive questions or topics by a researcher (and institutional ethical review boards) may not always be regarded in that light by some research participants. Such realities challenge the underlying principles, purpose, and philosophies of most prescriptive ethical guidelines and requirements, which in turn question their relevance in the field. Moreover, we also learned that making mistakes, poor judgements, and other embarrassing episodes are all part of the learning curve. This is one of the motivations of this paper so that others can read about our experience and draw lessons.

In the field, we were aware that street traders in Madina and Nima markets do so in violation of local government laws. This raises an important ethical question relating to our data collection process, for example, what happens when a street trader offers a seat on a pedestrian walkway? This posed a significant dilemma and we had to make several tough decisions under such circumstances. Also, we were aware that our fieldwork caused disruptions to the traders who were desperate to woo customers while we had to complete our interviews, and it was not always possible to find alternative locations. The extent to which field experience equips a researcher to be an ‘ethical thinker’ finds credence and support from scholarly works (Kahn & Mastroianni, 2001; Downes et al., 2014). It has been argued that ethical standards should go beyond rule-based approaches and rather give more experienced researchers some space to take appropriate decisions on unpredicted ethical matters in order to become ethical thinkers (Downes et al., 2014) or virtuous investigators. Kahn and Mastroianni (2001) agree with Greg Koski, who said, ‘we must move beyond the culture of compliance, to move to a culture of conscience and responsibility’ (Hills, 2000 as cited by Kahn & Mastroianni, 2001: 925). We encountered several challenging moments during the interviews that straddled the line between conscience and responsibility.

In one instance, we were interviewing a participant, a female trader who was cooking and simultaneously attending to an 18-month-old grandchild. At one point, this participant was trying to catch the attention of potential customers and her grandchild started crawling toward a burning coal pot and obviously getting into danger. We intuitively carried the child but in so doing lost an opportunity to observe the natural unfolding of how the trader would daily address such conflicting demands. In such a difficult moment what should a researcher do? We wanted to observe her life but at the same time, it was obvious that she needed support. We faced several similar situations like this where our participants were multitasking, and we were unsure whether to provide assistance or

not. However, we knew that assisting this female participant in either of the chores would have affected the true picture of what her day often looks like and in turn interfere with what we were studying – females in the market space. Yet, although we were researchers, we also had multiple identities which came with some expectations, values, and norms. Does it mean that once you are in the field your other identities (male, father, and human) and values become irrelevant and non-existent? If so, what does that portray for rapport, reflexivity, and future cooperation? Will a researcher be seen as insensitive and self-centred, that is, only interested in data collection if they numb their locally/culturally acquired conscience for the sake of observing the situated meaning of a phenomenon? We struggled with these dilemmas. Perhaps being an outsider reduces expectations, invoking the debate about the benefits and drawbacks of being either an insider or an outsider.

Exiting the Field and Afterwards

Although how a researcher exits the field is a crucial part of fieldwork and holds several implications including ethics, analysis, validation, future studies, and so on, ironically, not enough attention is given to this area. Even the few studies that share insightful fieldwork experiences do not adequately cover this. During our fieldwork, we made new friends and heard personal and touching stories. Some of these revelations were not directly connected to our study but we had to listen, and in some cases, sympathise. Some research participants communicated that they considered us as new friends whom they could call on for advice in areas where they thought we could help, for example, their children’s education. We have felt a sense of duty to those participants who have sought to keep this friendship.

In keeping with the cultural context, we sometimes visit them in the market just to say hello. In the Ghanaian cultural context – more so in the open markets, unannounced visits are generally not frowned upon, at least to the extent to which it is seen in the Global North. People can stop by to check on loved ones without prior notice. In this context, our occasional visits to research participants even after years following our fieldwork are usually appreciated and perceived as an expression of interest in their lives. By default, we have subsequently learned more about the market during such ‘post’ fieldwork visits making these experiences an integral part of our knowledge acquisition process. This represents a significant difference between an outsider who interviews, and leaves the research site, compared to an insider who has further opportunities to return. This is not to suggest that all outsider researchers abandon their research participants or all insider researchers are willing or able to return to research sites. Moreover, in an era of social media and various communication avenues, the influence of distance is somewhat reduced, providing additional opportunities for researchers to stay in touch with participants.

Yet, the difference in the exit experiences of outsiders/insiders and the ethical issues that it invokes must be examined in more detail. Based on our experience, for insiders, the kind of ethical issues that come up at the point of exiting the field include a sense of obligation toward research participants. We saw and heard of people who had lost their life savings in the markets after city authorities had raided their locations and destroyed their so-called illegal structures. At other times, some lost their wares due to market fires and most genuinely needed financial support to re-establish themselves. Others had taken loans and could not repay. In most instances, we could only sympathise. There were moments when the lure to deceive was strong; for example, after we had heard of some genuinely sad and touching stories we felt it was appropriate to help. We were sometimes tempted to promise these women we would send them some money but this was unlikely. In the short term, we felt embarrassed for being honest but believed it was the right thing to do. We also believed that deceiving could jeopardize the prospects of future researchers because of our bad legacy. After all, for some research participants, researchers are all the same and if they have a bad experience with one it may affect how they interact with other researchers in future. Thus said, the sense of responsibility to future researchers (and research participants) also informed our ethical decisions on, for example, 'to deceive or not to deceive'.

Outsiders may share similar views but for insiders, seeing participants and communities regularly creates a different kind of post-fieldwork feeling of obligation. This becomes more likely where a researcher becomes aware of or shares some of the challenges facing research participants. In our case, we sometimes felt we were exploiting the research participants if we did not pick their calls at awkward times or felt we were too busy to talk. The participants were busy when they offered us the opportunity to interview them and they sacrificed their time and knowledge at the expense of losing potential customers and telling us personal stories. Do we owe them some ethical obligations in return? We decided as a team that we would not just see research participants as objects but as people who should be engaged after we exited. As individuals, we have been in touch with some of the research participants since the completion of our fieldwork. We have been able to provide some with advice on educational and career opportunities for their children. These have been really helpful for our research participants. In other words, information on education and career opportunities can be one way to help or give back to research participants in such markets whether one is an insider or outsider.

Conclusion

Five major phases in the research into informal open markets in Ghana have engaged our attention in this paper, namely: (1) preparing to enter the field; (2) negotiating access; (3) observations and handling interviews; (4) dealing with ethical dilemmas; and (5) exiting the field. This article stems from two

interrelated reasons: first, the desire to share our rich experience from a study on two informal open markets in Accra; and second, how we leveraged local knowledge to mitigate some of the pitfalls associated with field research. We hope our experience will help other researchers, particularly emerging researchers who may want to engage in this space, find some knowledge about how to create the environment for rich fieldwork. In particular, we hope our experience will draw attention to issues involving access, negotiating challenges, and optimizing opportunities for successful fieldwork.

The regime that governs an insider leaving the field is in some areas markedly different from that of the outsider. Some leave with a psychological sense of burden, as rightly captured by Dickson-Swift et al., (2007: 328), who note, 'researchers undertaking qualitative research, and particularly qualitative research on sensitive topics, need to be able to make an assessment of the impact of the research on both the participants and themselves'. How do you see the persons you interviewed and pretend as if the content of the interview and the revelations will have no impact on subsequent interactions, discussions and expectations? As an African proverb goes, 'A leopard cannot change its spots'. If you are an insider, you cannot take away all of your insider's identities and assume a new personhood of a researcher totally disconnected from the previous identity.

This view contributes crucial insights into how emerging researchers can prepare their minds when researching as an insider or outsider. We can also use creative means to transform different spaces into appropriate research sites by altering the order of questioning through a *dialogical process* with research participants. In this way, researchers who may straddle the spectrum from insider-insider to outsider-outsider can have an additional creative means to adapt situations in the field without putting research participants at unnecessary risk. To conclude, it may be worth exploring in another study how women's interactions with different constituents of males is evolving within female-dominated spaces/markets – and what this means for gender responsive projects.

This paper is our modest contribution to the growing number of publications that share lessons from the field as part of broader and ongoing efforts aimed at strengthening scholarship through less onerous field experience, especially in the Global South. To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first by African male researchers sharing their field experience in predominantly female-dominated informal market spaces. Hopefully, others will join in the bid to publish more of such field experiences.

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