Researcher’s identities and knowledge production: exploring insider/outsider dynamics and intersectionalities.

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In this paper, we explore the role of insider/outsider dynamics and of intersectionalities in ethnographic research in sub-Saharan Africa. Our contribution builds on three key assumptions. Firstly, we understand the insider/outsider status as both precarious and shifting according to the various encounters we make along the research process. Secondly, we acknowledge that we all have multiple intersecting identities and positionalities, including multiple outsider and insider status. However, and thirdly, we also believe that constructions such as race/ethnicity significantly contribute to the shaping of our insider/outsider status, especially when we do research in sub-Saharan Africa. In this regard, we acknowledge existing critical questions regarding the ethics of studying Africa from an outsider status (Mama, 2007), especially considering academic knowledge about Africa, whatever the field, is produced mainly by institutions and scholars outside the continent (Adebayo, 2006).

Previous research has explored the distinctiveness of doing ethnography in Africa from an insider status (e.g. Natukunda et al., 2016), highlighting a set of distinctive dimensions, including those related to the impact of western knowledge systems but also regarding a set of specific challenges faced by native ethnographer on along the research process, from access to participants to the politics of representation.

Other studies have explored the research process from an outsider position (Girei, 2017), enlightening dilemmas and controversies linked especially to dimensions such as trust, privilege, whiteness, and power asymmetries more generally.

In this research we share our tales from the field, the experiences we had with research participants, the challenges around the insider/outsider dynamics and the engagement with participants’ subject positions along the research process, focusing especially on a) trust and authenticity, b) power and authority and c) voice and politics of representation.

This research adopts a critical interpretivist approach and draws on several theoretical streams, such as critical management studies, postcolonial theory and feminism. With regard to methods, face-to-face unstructured interviews were conducted with both insider and outsider scholars.

With this research, we aim to make two main contributions. One is that of addressing the gap related to the exploration of the insider/outsider dynamics in management research in international development, looking specifically at Africa. The other is that of unpacking the outsider/insider dynamics by nurturing an inter-subjective dialogue committed to recognise how the insider/outsider dynamics is shaped by insider/black and outsider/white markers and how this affect the process of knowledge production. However, we also aim to identify bridges, overlapping and commonalities between those markers and fractures within them, so to provide field-based twofold reflections on the precariousness of the insider/outsider dynamics.

Key words: researcher identity, insider, outsider/insider, intersectionality, reflexivity
References


