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“But You Are Also Ghanaian, You Should Know”: (Re)negotiating Researcher Identity and Positionality When Conducting Fieldwork at and Away from Home

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Title: "But You Are Also Ghanaian, You Should Know": (Re)negotiating Researcher Identity and Positionality When Conducting Fieldwork at and Away from Home

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Abstract:

In much of qualitative research, a binary distinction of insider vs. outsider appears to exist when it comes to the discussion of researcher identity and positionality. Either you are an insider researching an area from within or you are an outsider researching from without. Such a binary distinction is problematic, however, because it creates categories that portray researcher identity to be static. Moreover, such categorisation does not adequately capture fluid and complex experiences within the research process. Researchers in some instances have to (re)negotiate their insider vs. outsider status at various points of the research encounter. Some researchers might consider themselves as neither total insiders nor total outsiders in relation to their research participants and location. In such instances, the question of researcher identity is not fixed but becomes blurred, with implications for the knowledge production process. This paper offers a reflexive account of my shifting researcher identity and positionality over the course of two periods (2014-2015) of fieldwork in Ghana. My research focused on an examination of the governing of tourism-led local economic development planning in Elmina, Ghana. I conducted interviews with policy makers, community leaders, and other stakeholders at national, regional, and local levels (66 interviews in total).

In the course of the interviews, I was called upon on many occasions by my interviewees to fill in silences and comprehend unspoken meanings on the basis that I am also a Ghanaian. At such moments, I had to (re)negotiate my identity as a Ghanaian (but living in the UK) and my researcher positionality in order not to compromise my research findings. Thus, I had to accept being a Ghanaian while showing that I lack the basis for a shared understanding in comprehending the unspoken meanings of my interviewees. The challenge was to put aside my own understandings and to find a way to get interviewees to open up and be explicit. I had to remind interviewees that, although I am a Ghanaian (an insider), I was during that particular encounter a researcher (an outsider). At the same time, my insider status as a Ghanaian on occasions allowed me further access to research materials that an outsider only status would not have made possible. There are meaningful differences between being a part of a broad cultural group and sharing a personal history with research participants. These differences affect where researchers define as home, how they perceive their insider vs. outsider status, and whether research participants accept or amend this status in the course of the research encounter. The idea of this paper is to make explicit the shifting insider vs. outsider researcher identity and positionality, and to explore how this shapes the co-construction of knowledge during fieldwork. It is also to make explicit how intersubjective elements in the research encounter shape data collection and analysis.

A combination of traditional presentation and a staged drama sketch will be used to deliver this paper. The drama sketch will involve the reading of a script (dialogue) to replicate how research identity and positionality are (re)negotiated in the research encounter. This should generate insights for discussion in the session.