"But You Are Also Ghanaian, You Should Know": Negotiating the Insider–Outsider Research Positionality in the Fieldwork Encounter

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Abstract

The reflexive turn in sociology and across much of the social sciences has brought a central focus on the "self" within research encounters. Within this context, qualitative researchers are required to highlight how their positionality shapes their research experience. In this article, we interrogate how our own personal experiences as native Ghanaians conducting research at home and away from home in two different African countries—Ghana and Malawi—shaped our research positionality. We use the framework of credibility and approachability and develop new categories such as the eager learner. We show how our performed behaviors and perceived characteristics enabled and constrained our access to research participants and information. The analysis contributes to the research methods literature by highlighting the fieldwork encounter as a site of shifting, negotiated, and fluid positionalities for both fully insiders and fully outsiders.

Keywords

fieldwork, Ghana, insider/outsider, Malawi, positionality

Introduction

Within the constantly evolving realm of innovations in research methods, the "self" has come to occupy a central place. The use of the self in research has expanded in a bid to address issues of reflexivity, intersubjectivity, and the (de) colonization of knowledge. Reflexivity as ". . . a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and the world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 35) calls for researchers to examine their personal characteristics, positionality, and the intersubjective elements in the research encounter that shape and to an extent transform the research enterprise and findings as a whole. Not only do researchers have to introspect, they are being called upon to highlight the specifics of their personal experiences to account for the particularities of their research findings. This is especially true when it comes to research conducted in the researcher's "home"— be it a geographical home (Wiederhold, 2015) or linguistic home (Lincoln, González y González, & Massera, 2016; Shope, 2006). An academic's sense of home is however fluid (Wiederhold, 2015) and hence the need to interrogate how the researcher positionality and reflexivity shift with their changing sense of "home" in the research encounter. The notion of conducting research at home tends to imply that

researchers are insiders, whereas those conducting research away from home are considered as outsiders (Bhattacharya, 2007; Breen, 2007; Court & Abbas, 2013; Hill, 2006). Such at home (insider) and away from home (outsider) binary is problematic in a number of ways not least because "we are all multiple insiders and outsiders" (Deutsch, 1981, p. 174). Moreover, the notion of home varies based on the perceptions of the researcher and the researched as well as the type of research. Consequently, there is the need to unpack this process.

In this research paper, we interrogate our own personal experiences as native Ghanaians conducting research at home and away from home in Ghana and Malawi. We reflect on how our sense of home vis-à-vis the perceptions of our participants shaped our research experience in the field. In exploring our insider/outsider (at home/away from

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home) status, we seek to create an avenue for addressing some of the challenges in researcher subjectivity and shifting positionality. In line with other researchers, we found our status as an insider and/or an outsider to be in flux and never static (Bhattacharya, 2007; Blix, 2015; Kanuha, 2000; Kerstetter, 2012; Razon & Ross, 2012). However, our status was constantly negotiated depending on the context, our respondents, and the topic of inquiry. In analyzing how we negotiated our insider–outsider positionality, we draw from and build on the analytic framework of credibility and approachability as operationalized by Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017). Based on our experience, we agree with their argument that although there is an intentional performative aspect to these concepts, credibility and approachability are also imputed upon researchers by the researched.

Consistent with the arguments put forward by Berger (2015), we found that our reflexivity was shaped, on one hand, by our sense of being part of the researched and sharing in their experiences (performed credibility and approachability). On the other hand, we quickly realized that sometimes our sense of being a part of the researched and their experiences did not always find agreement with them (imputed credibility and approachability). Interestingly, on occasions when participants accepted our sense of being part of the researched, it was used to withhold some information on the basis that we ought to instinctively know the answer to some of the very issues we were researching.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section offers a brief biography and overview of each author's research. Afterward, an overview of the credibility and approachability framework and how it links to the notions of home and researcher reflectivity is presented. We then move on to reflect on our fieldwork experiences within the context of the framework. In the "Conclusion" section, we draw together similarities and differences from our experiences to highlight and problematize the idea of "home" and the insider/outsider binary.

Background of Researchers and Their Studies

The first author was born and raised in Ghana until he left in 2009 to pursue postgraduate studies in Europe. He reflects on doctoral research involving two phases of fieldwork in Ghana. The first phase spanned a 3-month period between August and November, 2014; the second phase took place between July and August, 2015. The bulk of the fieldwork activities took place in the Greater Accra Region and the Central Region of Ghana. His experiences reflect a context where a researcher is fluent in the main local language, in this case Akan Twi and Fante. Interviews were however conducted in English, which is the official language of the country. He studied the governance processes

within which a tourism-led local economic development initiative—known as the Elmina 2015 Strategy—took place (Adu-Ampong, 2016). The goal of the Elmina 2015 Strategy was to stimulate local economic development through heritage tourism that centered on the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the St. George's Castle in the city of Elmina. The overall aim of the research project was to explore how the institutional and political arrangements including stakeholder capacities influenced the planning, implementation, and outcome of the Elmina 2015 Strategy. In addition to observations and photo taking, the main component of the fieldwork involved key stakeholder interviews as well as community focus group discussions.

The research topic under investigation therefore required asking questions about the policymaking processes and the institutional structures through which the Elmina 2015 Strategy was developed and implemented. The fieldwork interviews explored the role of key individuals in shaping the policy and implementation process. The eventual outcome of the Elmina 2015 Strategy was not entirely satisfactory (Adu-Ampong, 2016). Consequently, some stakeholders had very strong opinions regarding the outcome given the amount of work and hope that went into the making of the strategy.

The second author is also a Ghanaian who was born and raised in Ghana until he left in 2009 to pursue postgraduate studies in the United States. His research project and fieldwork took place in Malawi, a country in the southern part of Sub-Saharan Africa. With no familiarity whatsoever with Malawi prior to the project, he made the decision to enroll in a course on basic Chichewa—the most common local language in Malawi. This language course enabled him to learn basic greetings and expressions. The overall aim of his research project was to understand if decentralized community-based institutions could improve access to potable water in poor urban and peri-urban areas of Malawi and at the same time promote community participation, empowerment, and development.

Malawians who live in poor urban and peri-urban settlements constantly grapple with poor access to drinking water, a situation compounded by poverty, insecure housing, poor sanitation and toilet facilities, and poor governance (Adams, 2018). Among many attempted solutions, the government implemented broad decentralization reforms in the water sector that advocated for bottom-up management of water by local communities. The research project assessed the opportunities and prospects for such community-based models of water governance to enhance water supply in poor, vulnerable, and often underserved areas of the city. The project required a mixed methods approach combining household surveys with stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions, and archival and policy document analyses to interrogate the role of broader, national institutional arrangements in advancing the

Table 1. Operationalization of Credibility and Approachability.

Credibility: Researcher is worthwhile investment of time		Approachability: Researcher is nonthreatening and safe	
Performed	Perceived	Performed	Perceived
Cultural credibility	Vouched for by key informants	Acceptable incompetent	Nonthreatening demeanor
Professional academic credibility	Hierarchical differentiation	Selective competence	Intrigue factor
	Esteem from education		Eager learner

Source. Adapted from Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017, p. 381).

objectives behind decentralized water governance and outcomes.

The project involved three phases of fieldwork campaigns. The first campaign was a 1-month exploratory study in June 2012 to identify study sites, conduct informal interviews with stakeholders and water users, collect policy documents and archival materials, all with the goal of better understanding the local context to ask the right research questions. The second fieldwork campaign lasted 1 month (July–August, 2013) and was entirely dedicated to interviews with actors and stakeholders in the water sector and identification of research assistants. A pilot testing of household surveys was carried out during the second fieldwork campaign. The final fieldwork spanned 4 months (June-September, 2014) and was the most intensive of all the fieldwork campaigns. The final campaign also involved 650 household surveys in urban informal settlements (also known as slums), collection of water samples to analyze quality, focus group discussions with executive members of Water User Associations and community members, and additional stakeholder interviews. A key finding from this research was that although community-based governance under Water User Associations (WUAs) can improve potable water access for peri-urban settlements, trade-offs between water supply and social goals of participation and community empowerment ensue (Adams and Zulu, 2015).

The Credibility and Approachability Framework

Credibility and approachability are behavioral performances (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017) argue that such performance-based approach does not provide a complete picture, especially when these concepts are applied within the research environment. They point out that although approachability and credibility are behaviors that one intentionally performs, they also get imputed unto researchers by the researched. In a sense, credibility and approachability are characterizations of how a researcher intentionally behaves in the fieldwork encounter as well as how the researched perceives the behavior of the researcher. Credibility and

approachability thus open up a space in which to interrogate researcher positionality and "the power-laden particularities of the interaction" (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017, p. 380) in the fieldwork setting.

Table 1 provides an overview of the operationalization of credibility and approachability as adapted from Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017, p. 381)

As a performative and perceived characteristic, approachability relates to the extent to which the researched sees the researcher as being nonthreatening. While Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017) identify "acceptable incompetent" and "comrade" as the two key approachability roles in the field, our research identified additional roles such as an eager learner. These roles are discussed in much detail below within our empirical case studies.

Credibility

For the researched, researchers need to establish themselves as worthy of the time to be invested in the research. Given that most of the researched in the first author's project were busy professionals, Adu-Ampong had to establish and perform credibility along many lines. Much of this performance relates to professional academic credibility. This was important because to establish trust and rapport, the researched had to be able to perceive Adu-Ampong as a credible academic who will be objective and unbiased in reporting information. During fieldwork, the first point of contact with the researched was by telephone. It was at this initial point of contact that Adu-Ampong performed and established his first professional academic credibility. The emphasis here was placed on his institutional affiliation and his status as a PhD researcher. Introducing himself and discussing his status as a PhD researcher at an elite university in the United Kingdom allowed Adu-Ampong to project himself as a credible researcher worthy of the investment of time and effort from the researched. This strategy worked well among all groups of the researched because there is both an implicit and explicit respect for the well educated in Ghanaian society (Akyeampong, 2009; Morley, Leach, & Lugg, 2009).

It is partly in this light that we argue that credibility is an imputed characteristic, in addition to being performed. The

researched perceived Adu-Ampong as credible because he was enrolled on a doctoral program. Consequently, although they were often busy, the researched perceived granting interview time to Adu-Ampong as a worthwhile investment of their time. Even when there was perceived credibility, Adu-Ampong's professional academic standing had to be authenticated. This authentication process to enhance credibility came in the form of professional markers such as the use of the University of Sheffield's logo on both the Participant Information Sheet and the Participant Consent Forms. Adu-Ampong also gave participants his business card featuring his university's logo in case they needed to contact him after the interview. These markers contributed to establishing a professional and thus a credible status that became reinforced by the credibility imputed unto him by the researched.

In the case of Adams he had to establish credibility with two main groups of people: urban informal settlement communities and professionals in policy positions. The perception of credibility for the two groups differed and therefore he had to use different approaches both to introduce himself and the research project. Professionals in agency positions were more interested in his credibility as an academic before anything else. He navigated these professional office spaces by first introducing himself as a PhD student from an overseas university interested in water scarcity and related institutional solutions in Malawi. Credibility was attained by such simple practices as showing a concept note of the research with a list of partner institutions from Malawi, and an ethical approval letter of the study on his university's letterhead.

Besides introducing himself as a doctoral student, showing formal affiliations with scholars and institutions from within boosted his credibility despite his perceived outsider status as a non-Malawian. It was critical that he portrayed himself credible by showing that other local scholars approve the project and are collaborators on it. He provided letters of support from two sociology professors from the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources and told interviewees of his official affiliation. He talked about his partnership with the Center for Water, Sanitation, Health and Appropriate Technologies (WASHTED) with pride, often informing interviewees about the free access to an office space and a laboratory granted him at the WASHTED.

Like Adu-Ampong, Adams in his interactions with professionals performed as a professional insider while carefully navigating his place as an outsider deserving of their time, information, and respect. Seeking for an insider perspective, Adams' performance of credibility involved demonstrating personal ties to native Malawians. Where necessary, he mentioned the name of his PhD advisor who is well respected as a scholar from Malawi who emigrated to the United States following decades of service to the country's Department of Forestry. A typical example is in this encounter with the head of UN Habitat's office in Malawi:

> Adams: I am thrilled to be in Malawi. I am doing a doctoral research on water access and governance with respect to urban informal settlements.
>
> Head of UN Habitat Malawi (HoHM): Welcome. You sound like you are not Malawian.
>
> Adams: I am not from Malawi. I am from Ghana but currently studying at the Michigan State University.
>
> HoHM: Oh interesting. Why did you not go to Ghana to study? Why did you choose Malawi over your own country Ghana?
>
> Adams: It is a long story. Several factors contributed to my choice of Malawi over Ghana. One of it is that my PhD advisor is Malawian and is already doing research here. I came with him. He is called Leo Zulu.
>
> HoHM: What? Is his middle name Charles?
>
> Adams: Yes, he is Leo Charles Zulu
>
> HoHM: What a small world. He was my classmate in elementary school at the Kamuzu Academy. I have not seen him for years. Tell him I said hello and that I now work for the United Nations Habitat office here in Malawi.
>
> Adams: I am thrilled to learn that you know my advisor

The serendipity of this encounter was a real opportunity and door opener for establishing Adams' credibility as the interviewee established his professional connections with a native Malawian known to the interviewee. This was one of several ways he was able to constantly navigate the role of an outsider using networks and ties with insider scholars to authenticate his own credibility.

While performing professional academic credibility, there were elements of these performances that centered on cultural credibility, which "refers to the behaviours enacted by researchers to illustrate their familiarity and openness with specific racial-ethnic communities" (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017, p. 381). For Adu-Ampong the performative aspects of cultural credibility were rooted on being Ghanaian by birth and being educated up to the university level. Fluency in the local language served as a marker of cultural credibility and the establishment of trust. It is in the performance of cultural credibility that established Adu-Ampong's insider status in many instances. This

status offered advantages in terms of ease of access to the field, bypassing of gatekeepers, and the researched often going all out to provide extra information. Given that he is Ghanaian with prior research experience in the Central Region, Adu-Ampong was familiar with the research setting. Moreover, there were a couple of the interviewees whom he had interviewed before as part of an earlier separate project. He could therefore consider himself as being an insider and at home in the research setting. However, this was not a settled status but one that he had to constantly negotiate during every interview interaction. There was the need to move from being an "insider at home" to an "insider away from home" depending on which status allows interviewees to be more forthcoming.

Although an insider at home status offered many advantages, there were some limitations to it. After more than a week of completing a visitor form in the secretary's office and sitting in the waiting room for an interview opportunity, Adu-Ampong had no lack in securing an interview with a government minister and her deputy. However much he played on the fluid boundaries of an insider and an outsider in the waiting room, access was denied. Access became permanently shut when he made what in hindsight was a mistake by directly approaching the deputy minister in the corridor to ask for an interview. While he sought to perform professional credibility in the direct approach, it was perceived as a lack of respect for hierarchical differentiation and a perceived lack of vouching for by the secretary as the gate keeper. On some other occasions, his insider status led to some interviewees intentionally withholding information from him on the basis that being Ghanaian entailed having implicit knowledge of certain things. For instance, during his interview with a District Development Planning Officer in which he asked about the sources of implementation challenges, the officer insisted (half earnestly, half in jest) "[t]hat one maybe I don't know, you are also a Ghanaian." The implication of this response was that by being Ghanaian, Adu-Ampong ought to know instinctively some of these challenges to development plan implementation. This raises interesting questions about the extent to which tacit knowledge from being an insider shapes how researchers analyze and evaluate research data collected from fieldwork settings they consider as home.

The construction of credibility also involves downplaying certain researcher characteristics while highlighting others (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). Credibility in the research setting is performative and often involves co-construction between the researcher and the researched. Thus, Adu-Ampong in some instances had to downplay his Ghanaian roots by pointing out that he has been out of the country for more than 5 years. Furthermore, he had to downplay part of his professional credibility by highlighting the fact that he has no prior professional work experience in Ghana. By downplaying certain characteristics, Adu-Ampong sought to project himself as an outsider to get his interviewees to provide more detailed answers and explanation on questions of tourism-led local economic development planning. This experience of highlighting his insider status on one hand and simultaneously downplaying certain characteristics to appear as an outsider provided an insight into the malleability of such binaries.

Cultural Credibility

Compared with the ease with which Adu-Ampong claimed cultural credibility based on his insider (native) status, Adams faced a more challenging task navigating the performative dimensions of cultural credibility as a non-Malawian or outsider. He navigated cultural acceptability as an "insider–outsider" through several ways, such as interactions with the traditional head in the community whom everyone knew, as well as using translators and research assistants. Trust and credibility in the informal settlement communities were based on his ability to show basic understanding of Malawian culture, including an ability to utter basic language expressions. Here, Adams presented himself first as an African in Malawi, embodying some level of "insider-ness" while at the same time recognizing that his status as a non-Malawian (*and hence an outsider*) was nonnegotiable.

In contrast with Adu-Ampong who expressed his insider status through fluency in the native Ghanaian language, Adams used his basic familiarity with *Chichewa*, the commonest and most spoken language in Malawi, to moderate his outsider identity. This performative approach subtly served to negotiate cultural acceptability from the communities he was researching. It is worth noting that Adams' language ability in *Chichewa* did not extend beyond basic greetings. Nonetheless, his ability and eager willingness to express basic greetings and pleasantries in *Chichewa* brought excitement to many households he visited. Although this ability to speak basic *Chichewa* did not impute on him complete cultural and insider credibility, it at least tempered his outsider status and granted him some level of cultural acceptability.

Adams' apparent outsider status meant that he had to navigate research encounters based on his African roots in an attempt to shift toward a more insider status. On a number of occasions, he had to address initial identity questions with the response of "but we are all Africans" as an icebreaker technique. This allowed the people he met to perceive him as "one of us." Excerpts from an introductory conversation (below) prior to a focus group discussion with community leaders demonstrate this constantly shifting *outsider–insider* status and how the perceived African *oneness* with the community, created a welcoming research environment.

Group leader: You are welcome to Malawi. We are happy to have you here and hope we can help you with the information you need for your research.

Adams: Thank you. I am also thrilled to be here and want to say thank you for accepting my request to conduct a focus group discussion with the executives of the Water Users Association.

Group leader: Before we begin, tell us a little about yourself and why you are here. We can see on your card that you are schooling in America. But you sound like an African.

Adams: Yes, I am an African and originally from Ghana. I am doing my doctoral studies in the United States. I am here to understand how communities mobilize to solve their water problems.

Group leader: We are very happy to have welcome you. In fact, we are one people even though you are from Ghana. I do not know if you are aware of this history, but our first president, Kamuzu Banda, was a very good friend of Kwame Nkrumah, your country's first president. Nkrumah was the one who trained Banda and motivated him to lead Malawi to independence. Ghanaians and Malawians are one people because Kamuzu lived in Ghana for a long time before coming back to lead Malawi to independence.

Adams: I am not familiar with this history. This is the first time I am hearing about it. I am happy to hear that we are one people with some common history.

The interaction above clearly illustrates how Adams as an outsider researching away from home morphed into one of a perceived insider based on a shared history between his home country and Malawi. This sense of shared history between himself and the researched established trust and was critical to a successful focus group. Thus, for Adams, the construction of cultural credibility involved highlighting his Ghanaian roots and relating this to a shared Africanness with Malawians. Consequently, the researched were able to look beyond his non-Malawian roots and grant him a level of credibility on the basis that he is African whose native country shares historical ties with Malawi.

Approachability

To be approachable in the research encounter is to come across as nonthreatening and safe (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). Approachability is an important quality for what Lofland et al. (2006) call, "getting in and getting along" in the field. The chance of success in getting access to the researched is enhanced if the researcher "enters

negotiations armed with connections, accounts, knowledge, and courtesy" (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 41). While such an active performance of approachability is important, the likelihood of success also depends on the extent to which the researched also perceives the researcher as approachable. Both performed and perceived approachability can vary depending on the researcher's positionality as an insider or an outsider, but it is important to bear in mind that such categories are fluid and need to be negotiated. Below we discuss the various strategies we used in performing approachability and the basis on which we considered that the researched perceived us as approachable.

Performed Approachability

The performance of approachability within the fieldwork encounter is as much a presentational strategy as it is managing one's self. Goffman (1959) in his classic text on "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" sets out how individuals engage in both conscious and unconscious presentational strategies that seek to create and sustain particular impressions of the self in congruence with their social roles. Goffman succinctly notes that

> [s]ometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. (p. 3)

Within our research experience, the main self-presentational strategy that enabled us to get in and get along with our research participant was that of a socially acceptable incompetent.

The socially acceptable incompetent is a presentational strategy in which the researcher takes on the role of someone who is "ignorant" and therefore need to be "taught" things that may even appear obvious without taking offense (Lofland et al., 2006). Qualitative research to an extent is about seeking for knowledge and understanding for that which we do not fully know or understand yet. Thus, the role of the socially acceptable incompetent is one that is commonly deployed by qualitative researchers (Primeau, 2003). In addition to its relationship to approachability, the performance of being a socially acceptable incompetent also brings a focus on the researcher's credibility.

In the course of Adu-Ampong's interview with the head of a government agency, there was a discussion about the development of historical forts along Ghana's coast into high-end tourist accommodation. Here, Adu-Ampong's presentation strategy of being a socially acceptable incompetent in relation to the historical background of some the forts led to questions about his cultural credibility. This entwining of credibility and approachability is seen in this interview dialogue below:

Head of Agency (HoA): Yeah, there is one up the hill Kormantse, it was called Kormantse locally, but it's also now called Fort Amsterdam because of its unique history which I will tell you in a bit. But where are you from?

Adu-Ampong (AA): I am from Dunkwa-On-Offin

HoA: So you are Fante essentially or Denkyira?

Adu-Ampong: No, I am Akuapem essentially; my mum is from Adukrom-Akuapem

HoA: So how can you be from Dunkwa-On-Offin?

Adu-Ampong: That is where I was born and grew up

HoA: Ah, yes, yes, yes but your mum is Fante

Adu-Ampong: My mum is Akuapem

HoA: Your dad is . . . ?

Adu-Ampong: Wassa, Wassa Amenfi

HoA: Why do they speak the Fante?

Adu-Ampong: Twi but there are a lot of Fantes there

HoA: Okay, so it is a meeting point. Yes, you know Fort Amsterdam is a bit of a ruin not too much, it was built in 1630s by the British which was a very important place for sending Africans out into the diaspora partly to Barbados I think, partly to Jamaica and Virginia . . .

In this dialogue, while he was certainly aware of the history of the Fort, Adu-Ampong had to come across as a socially acceptable incompetent eager to learn about the history of Fort Amsterdam. In this process, there was an interactive establishment of his cultural credibility in relation to questions about the ethnic background of his parents. To maintain his approachability and "keep the flow of information coming smoothly" (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 70), he performed both the role of the socially acceptable incompetent and the culturally credible. The simultaneous performance of these two seemingly contradictory categories shows that negotiation in the fieldwork encounter is a fluid process. It is therefore important for the researcher to constantly assess how best to come across as credible and approachable but deftly performing categories that get the researched to open up more in any given situation.

The performance of socially acceptable incompetent and approachability in the case of Adams was navigated carefully depending on the research encounter. To be a socially acceptable incompetent from the viewpoint of professionals in policy positions was to introduce his research with a clear sense of curiosity about water access challenges in urban Malawi. As the question of "why Malawi and not Ghana" came up repeatedly, his responses had to project him as an incompetent who knew nothing on the topic in the specific context of Malawi. His engagements with government agency workers who were knowledgeable about the topic revolved less around cultural incompetence and expressed instead as ignorance on the subject matter. In the local communities, by contrast, he presented himself as a curious student who was willing to learn how people mobilized to solve their daily water challenges. His experiences differ from that of Adu-Ampong in that there were occasions during community interactions where he was viewed simultaneously as culturally incompetent and a subject-matter competent.

As an expression of cultural incompetence, whenever Adams approached a household, his research assistant and translator first introduced him as a student native to Ghana but studying in the United States. The translator will then ask Adams to greet in the local language much to the surprise and excitement of the respondent given that he was not Malawian. Stepping into someone's house or compound with a local translator was certainly a demonstration of cultural incompetence. Yet, it was at the same time important to gain the trust of respondents by showing that he has attempted adopt some aspects of their culture. For example, Adams was asked repeatedly about where he was staying while in Malawi, and his response was that he had rented an apartment in Area 47. This response engendered both excitement and surprise, but more importantly reinforced the idea of an eager cultural incompetent seeking ways to learn, including choosing to live within the community rather than in a hotel.

Navigating the role of a socially acceptable incompetent during the household interviews was not always easy. On one hand, being an outsider who was culturally incompetent yet excited to be talking to the insiders created an atmosphere of trust and acceptability whereby respondents eagerly shared their daily challenges of water access. On the other hand, Adams' status as a doctoral researcher from America repeatedly projected him as an expert who could help solve water problems in Malawi or at the very least share his final report with the government and petition it to solve poor water access in these communities. Other households requested to know if he also worked for an organization abroad that can build community water points to help ease daily struggles for water. Although engaging in such discussions was useful and yielded important insights into the research project, Adams had to tread a fine line there. He consciously had to combine a level of incompetence and ignorance with enthusiasm about the topic under discussion. At the same time, however, he had to be careful not to intimidate the researched or come across as having the solution to their water challenges.

Perceived Approachability

For both of us, the three principal ways in which we saw that our interviewees perceived us as approachable came in the form of being considered to have nonthreatening demeanor, having an intrigue factor, and being an eager learner. An eager learner in the fieldwork context is characterized by having an open mind and showing the willingness to ask for and take in new information beyond what is directly related to the research query. An eager learner adapts more by showing interest in learning about wider context of the interviewee and their social situations. For Adu-Ampong the perception of a nonthreatening demeanor stemmed from the fact that he was seen as "one of us" in as much as he is a Ghanaian researching in Ghana. This shared cultural identity framed Adu-Ampong as approachable because of his insider status and the fact that he was researching at home. As the interview dialogue in the previous section points out, this perceived approachability had to be credibly demonstrated in the tracing of his ethnic identity. This perception of approachability was also underlined by his nonthreatening demeanor.

As Lofland et al. (2006) rightly note, the nonthreatening demeanor of researchers need to go beyond being courteous and respectful of the researched. It is also about preventing subtle threats to the beliefs, practices, and self-esteem of the researched through the actions of the researcher. Out of the 59 individual interviews conducted by Adu-Ampong only three of the interviewees had a doctorate. Although this level of educational hierarchical had a positive effect on the perceived professional credibility received from the researched, it was also important that the researched did not see this as a threat to them. This is where the need to come across as an eager learner was pertinent. Within this context, it was imperative that he was perceived as approachable despite the educational differences. For several interviewees and especially the three with doctorates, they could identify with the research experience and therefore considered the granting of an interview as their contribution to helping Adu-Ampong complete his studies.

In contrast, Adams had to navigate approachability very carefully given his outsider status. He realized that being perceived as approachable and nonthreatening was not a given; it had to be earned through different mechanisms depending on who he was talking to. Showing enthusiasm and intrigue about a new country he was alien to indicated that he was open to learning new things about a new country. Obviously, the professionals in government agencies he interviewed were more knowledgeable in water governance and policy processes. However, the initial impression at his introduction as a doctoral student had to quickly be followed by "but I am also an African from Ghana" to moderate any sense of intellectual threat. On the question of studying water governance and access in Malawi rather than Ghana, Adams had to maintain his approachability by pointing out that he was not by any means an expert on water issues in Ghana, despite being a native. He explained that he chose Malawi because it was above all else, a fascinating country he wanted to learn more about. This created an environment wherein interviewees perceived him as an approachable and eager learner.

In presenting a nonthreatening demeanor during community interviews and focus group discussions, Adams had to deemphasize his doctoral student status in some instances. This is because the communities where he researched were used to having undergraduate university students undertaking their final projects with them. Thus, Adams often introduced himself as a student interested in water access challenges. Sometimes, coming across as just a student, not necessarily at a doctoral level student, was necessary to create a respectful and less intimidating atmosphere devoid of any threat. In addition, his translator introduced him as a student from the United States interested not only in water issues in Malawi, but also fascinated by the culture and people. In such instances, Adams would talk about the famous *Chambo fish* as one of the things he enjoyed *in Malawi* to the amazement of community members. To the community members, their amazement both represented a sense of pride that a foreigner enjoys their native fish and a sign that Adams was welcome. They would ask him: "but in your country you do not have fish that is as tasty as chambo?" Some would go on to ask with excitement whether boiled, fried, or smoked chambo tasted best, and with excitement offer invitations to their house to enjoy locally prepared chambo. These interactions served to frame Adams as an approachable and nonthreatening person.

Discussion and Conclusion

In everyday language and usage, to be home is to be in familiar surroundings whereas to be away from home is to be in unfamiliar surroundings. Within the academic research context however, the definition of "home" for a researcher is complex. This complexity stems from the highly mobile life of an average academic who leaves his home village to university in a big city and proceeds to move from one academic position to the other in different places. Over time, the occasional visits to see family and/or friends aside, she or he may never return to his or her original home village or country writ large. In the event that the academic returns for research purposes, is such a place considered "home" or not? Wiederhold (2015, p. 603) argues that "despite the weakness of the ties we often have to those towns of our upbringing, our relationships to these places situate us uniquely for qualitative research when we do choose to

return." Thus commonly, a distinction tends to be made between "researcher-at-home" and "researchers-not-at-home," where the former refers to those who conduct research in familiar surroundings that places them in the context of local knowledge. The latter refers to those in research sites that are new, unfamiliar, and/or lacking some personal history to the researcher. By extension, a researcher-at-home is seen as an insider whereas a researcher-not-at-home might be considered as an outsider.

The reflexive analysis offered in this article highlights the problematic nature of the insider–outsider binary thinking in the research encounter. We show that a researcher's identity as an insider and/or an outsider is never a settled status but one in constant flux and negotiation. We explore the negotiating process we undertook in gaining and maintaining access within the fieldwork encounter. The framework of credibility and approachability allows us to illustrate our multiple identities both actual and as perceived by the researched.

Our research experience and the analysis presented here highlight the limits of such insider–outsider and researcher-at-home-researcher-not-at-home dichotomies. These dichotomies do not fully capture the varied and complex experiences of some researchers who are neither total insiders nor outsiders both in relation to their research location and in relation to their research participants. For instance, although Adams actively put on a performance of professional academic credibility in his interviews with professionals in Malawi, his insider status as "one of us" was imputed unto him by community members because of a shared African identity and the historic ties between Ghana and Malawi. This is instructive because ordinarily Adams is an outsider because he is non-Malawian but this outsider perception became moderated on the basis that he is African, giving him a pseudo-insider status. The need to actively underemphasize one's insider status and move toward a perceived outsider status is exemplified in the case of Adu-Ampong. To gain and maintain access to information with participants, Adu-Ampong had to perform the role of a socially acceptable incompetent in terms of his knowledge of the professional work context in Ghana—notwithstanding his Ghanaian identity. These examples show that as researchers we had to manage our self-presentation in negotiating a fluid insider–outsider status across our fieldwork experience. These constant negotiations, however, were not always successful in securing access as in the example of Author A who made the mistake of approaching a government minister in the corridor rather than playing the long waiting game through the secretary.

As Mannay (2010, p. 91) rightly notes,

> [o]utsider myths assert that only researchers who possess the necessary objectivity and emotional distance from the field are able to conduct valid research on a given group. Conversely,

according to insider myths, the attributes of objectivity and emotional distance render outsiders inherently incapable of appreciating the true character of a group's life.

While the language of insider–outsider positionality allows for reflection on how a certain status enables and constrains the research encounter, our research experience shows the inadequacy of such a binary. There is need for a reflexive practice that is multilayered in providing an analysis of the multiple negotiations that go on in the research encounter. Such reflexive analysis needs to note the challenges, benefits, and privileges that come with fluid movements along the insider–outsider/researcher-at-home-researcher-not-at-home continua. The credibility and approachability framework with the additional categories presented here building on the work of Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017) provides an avenue to unpack the messiness of the research experience in a clear and transparent manner. We show how our performed behaviors and perceived characteristics enabled and constrained our access to research participants and information. The analysis contributes to the literature by highlighting the fieldwork encounter as a site of shifting, negotiated, and fluid research positionalities that are neither fully insiders nor fully outsiders. This framework has been helpful in navigating the shifting positionality while allowing for a more detailed reflection on the research fieldwork experience.

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