Researcher reflexivity and positionality in social science research: experiences of doing fieldwork with smallholder farmers in Central Uganda

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ABSTRACT
Social science researchers generate knowledge by engaging in fieldwork where phenomena are studied on a daily basis. While research in the natural sciences can be done with a higher degree of controlled assumptions, study elements and environment. On the contrary, social science research is much more complex and fluid under very dynamic settings, and with less control over research participants. The later presents unique experiences at every moment of fieldwork. This paper is based on my experience of doing fieldwork with smallholder farmers in central Uganda for a period of nine months spread throughout 2017/2018. Adopting the agency-structure theory, I examine the extent to which researchers' agency is optimized while observing the structural boundaries of research ethical practices and field contextual realities. My research reflexivity and positionality are anchored at multiple levels of empirical field work notably: at inception of a research idea, field data collection and dissemination of study results. Each of these levels present varying knowledge and power differences, researcher positioning, best practices and challenges for me as a researcher and to the study. I contend that social science researchers are entwined in a duality of relationship where on one hand they exercise their agency in everyday fieldwork interactions with the research community. On the other hand, researchers' agency is enabled or constrained by the structural rules of the game such as research ethical standards, academic supervisors and mentors' relations, university systems and publishers' requirements. Social science research is a field of continuous learning, thought-provoking, and empowering academic pursuit and career. Thus, researchers must be aware of the ongoing power differences, have a positive attitude to the field challenges; evoke their intuition, subjective position as well as observe the ethical practices in conducting good social science research. Thus, knowledge production within the social science field is an interactive, dynamic and unfolds with the prevails research setting, as well as constructed within the acceptable research standards.
Key word: ***Researcher, Reflexivity, Positionality, Fieldwork, Social Sciences***

1. Introduction

Social science researchers generate knowledge by engaging in fieldwork where phenomena are studied on a daily basis. While research in the natural sciences can be done with a higher degree of controlled assumptions, study elements and environment. Natural sciences have been described as a body of knowledge of interdependent propositions, often laboratory-tested and leading to validated generalisations (Rwabukwali 2007). On the contrary, social science research is much more complex and fluid under very dynamic settings, and with less control over research participants. Social scientist engages in collecting empirical evidence about day to day phenomena using a variety of methods. In essence, social science deals with "…. systematic inquiry into ways in which people, and the social institutions that they create, behave in relation to one another and to their environment" (Rwabukwali 20107:1). The field of social research is both an art and science industry. Firstly, it is a science because of the rigorous methodological principles and standards researcher must adhere to, and secondly, it is an art due to the flexibility needed to navigate through social processes in a manner that suits the personality and style of the artist researcher (D'silva et al. 2016). Social researchers seek answers about human relations, behavior, interactions, patterned relationships, cultural systems, institutions and organization which are highly intricate.

However, social research does not simply happen, rather it is planned, systematic following scientific rigor embedded in particular theoretical questions and practical issues to investigate (Fulcher and John 2011). Researcher must be clear about the study purpose, methods that are

appropriate to elicit information, style of research (methods that fit well together) and strategies through which methods and techniques tie together into coherent project (Fulcher and John 2011). A research design helps to develop a clear road map to the field and ways in which to interface with research community and participants (Creswell 2014). Research relations while doing fieldwork is a key methodological issue; when a relationship is too close that lead to bias in the collection and interpretation of research materials. In addition, adherence to research ethics, institutional frameworks of academic and research publication institutions all affect the way researchers conduct fieldwork. Any scientific inquiry ought to adhere to research ethical standards, institutional frameworks and guidelines. Without researcher moral code, ethical principles can be compromised, thus professional codes of conduct in research is a means to re-engage with our own moral practices (Falcone 2010, Vetenskapsrådet 2017). Ethics refer to value conflict situations, or problems for which no choice seems to be completely satisfactory; pitting good but contradictory values against each other, as moral goodness or evil and with proper standards for human action (Rwabukwali 2007). Adherence to the setting of study participants, social setting and institutional research frameworks is not that easy in field of social sciences. Research have been categorized into two privative and positive ethics. On one hand, Rwabukwali (2007) asserts that privative ethics aims at reducing pain, suffering and misery. On the other hand, positive ethics increase human pleasure and happiness for example most social science research which is concerned with economic programmes, food security and livelihood studies that aim at general welfare and economic well-being of people. The essence of research ethics is to ensure that researchers must not engage in clandestine or secret research (Falcone 2010). Rather utmost integrity, honesty, truthfulness and protection of participants is at the forefront.

As a result, it is imperative for researchers to consider their positioning within the study which may influence the validity of the interpretation of the findings. It has also been argued that some what we call our data are really our own construction of other people's construction of what they and their compatriats are up to (Devine and Sue 2009). The way researchers relate with their study subjects, communities and measures to maneuver through structures of academics call for thorough reflexivity and researcher positionality especially in social sciences. This calls for a commitment to a self-critical approach to social analysis (reflexivity) has now become common in social sciences: the nature of field relations raises discussion around ethical issues. (Devine and Sue 2009). Reflexivity and positionality have become serious considerations in academic research especially within the social science disciplines.

The concept of reflexivity refers to the willingness to consider how one's background, personal values, and experiences affect what he or she is able to observe and analyze (D'silva et al. 2016). Reflexivity implies that the inquirer reflects about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations (Creswell 2014, Sultana 2007). Likewise, positionality can affect research outcomes and interpretations, due to the researchers position within the social world. Positionality is anchored in the Standpoint theories; based on general notion that one's position in society, including her identity construction and cultural background, influences the way they perceive the world (D'silva et al. 2016, Sultana 2007). Therefore, this paper is based on my experience of doing fieldwork with households of smallholder farmers in central Uganda. Adopting the agency-structure theory, I examine the extent to which researchers' agency is optimized while observing the structural boundaries of research ethical practices and field contextual realities. My research reflexivity and positionality are

anchored at multiple levels of empirical field work notably: at inception of a research idea, field data collection and dissemination of study results. Each of these levels present varying knowledge and power differences, researcher positioning, best practices and challenges for me as a researcher and to the study. The paper is structured into four main section, (i) the introduction, (ii) overview of the study project, (iii) discussion of researcher reflexivity and positionality, and (iv) conclusions and recommendations.

2. Overview of the study, methods and materials

I conducted fieldwork among households of smallholder farmers in central Uganda: who were beneficiaries of the Sustainable Enterprises for Trade Engagement (SENTE). The SENTE project implemented a *Kulima* mobile extension platform to disseminate agriculture information, knowledge and practices using lay extension agents. While mobile extension delivery for agricultural extension delivery is one of the information communication technologies (ICTs) tools implemented in several countries including Uganda. In this study, the focus was on a unique model which leverages mobile telephony application (mobile-based) for agriculture extension service delivery. The SENTE project was implemented in four years from September 2014 to September 2017, to a tune of UGX 1.7 billion approximately USD 4.6 million (Kimbowa 2015). A total of 17,000 households were mobilized as recipients of agricultural information and knowledge. This was intended to transform the livelihood of households from producing use value (subsistence) to exchange value-commercial farming (Kimbowa 2015, Mugabi et al. 2018). Thus, the main objective of my fieldwork was to examine the experiences of households while applying mobile extension (m-Agric) services to improve their livelihoods in central Uganda.

In this study, I adopted a mixed methods design. A mixed method design blends both quantitative (survey) and qualitative methods and techniques of data collection and analysis[1] (Creswell and Plano 2011, Creswell 2014, Lopez-Fernandez and Molina-Azorin 2011, Visser, Krosnick and Lavrakas 2000). Data were collected roughly at the same time for a period of nine months spread through 2017/2018). I conducted fieldwork in central Uganda consisting of seven districts of Masaka, Rakai, Kalungu, Lyantonde, Bukomansimbi, Kyotera and Lwengo. Study districts were purposively selected as part of the Sustainable Enterprises for Trade Engagement (SENTE) project which was implemented between 2014 and 2017. On one hand, survey method involved administering digital structured questionnaire to 390 households. In addition, unlike the use of conventional paper-based data collection techniques, survey questionnaire was customized on a smartphone with Open Data Kit (ODK) data collection platform. The survey questionnaire was designed in Gustinda Development Group Saleforce.com platform and later downloaded on the smartphones. On the other hand, a total of seven Focus Group Discussions were held with purposively selected study participants. The study was conducted with integrity by doing good and acceptable inquiry focusing on research ethical principles.

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[1] Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Quantitative research is an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analysed using statistical procedures (Creswell 2014:32).

Firstly, I sought for research ethical approval from Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethic Committee (REC) Committee (MAKSSREC 12.17.108). After ethical clearance from the Makerere University REC, I also pursued the approval of Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST)- UNCST (SS 4591) a regulator for all studies concerning human subjects in Uganda. The review and approval process by the ethics committee and UNCST were to ensure that the study does not violate any research standards and protects the rights and welfare of respondents. Secondly, for participants to take part in any study, it is imperative to consent by signing and dating an informed consent form before administering the survey questionnaire and conducting focus group discussions or any electronic recordings. The informed consent form was translated from English to Luganda language which is widely spoken by the study respondents. This was read to the respondents before administering the survey questionnaire, conducting face to face interviews and discussions. Respondents were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study information provided during informed consent before proceeding with any interview.

3. Discussion of Researcher reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity in research involves reflection on self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation; processes of fieldwork, challenging pre-given categories and narratives, and being attentive to power, knowledge and context (Sultana 2007). Reflexivity is a process that happens from the inception of a research idea to dissemination and publication of findings. My research reflexivity and positionality are anchored at multiple levels of empirical field work notably: inception of a research idea, field data collection and dissemination of study results. Each of these levels present varying knowledge and power differences, researcher positioning, best practices and challenges for me as a researcher and to the study as elucidated here below.

3.1 Preliminary fieldwork and Field data collection process

Before embarking on the intensive fieldwork, I conducted a preliminary field visit to map out the research stakeholders, establish key contacts, build rapport and gain entry to the field. This involved seeking for informed consent where participants signed and dated their consent forms, and at the same time answered affirmative to voluntary participate in the study. Unlike the online study where it becomes a dilemma as to whether the researcher should disclose their research activities to the participant, and what happens to the relationship between the two in case of disclosure (Devine and Sue 2009). Despite the few moral certainties in doing social science research, informed consent is a key ethical consideration. Study participants have a right to be informed about the study, must freely consent to be involved in any course of action of the study (Fulcher and John 2011, Mugeere 2017). Researchers ought to balance the ethical demands, moral principles and the quest for scientific knowledge. To adhere to such core research ethics, professional bodies have been created such as the institutional review board, University/research ethic committees, professional association (British Sociological Association, and American Sociological/Anthropological Association etc). Thus, I visited rural households and farmer groups in Bukomansimbi and Masaka districts. On my way to the respective study areas, along the roads, I observed homesteads of smallholder farmers with men, women and children engaged in different farming activities. This rekindled my childhood days, where life was about farming based on family labor. I grew up in Busoga region in Eastern Uganda, where farming is the main livelihood

just like in many rural areas. However, my study was in central Uganda that shares similar socio-economic activities, cultural values and all are Bantu speaking communities. I felt like am doing research at home, yet at same time an outsider to the research community (etic view). I was conscious and careful about my background; the similarity of socio-economic characteristics with those of the study community, to avoid bias and prejudices. I focused on empirical evidence; life experiences and opinions of my participants (as insiders/emic view) than my background as an outsider.

In addition, during preliminary field visit, I was accompanied by my academic supervisors at three different internals. The essence of supervisors coming along with me was to have an impression of the study community, and offer appropriate guidance especially on sampling and recruitment of participants. The fact that I went to the field by car, with note books, carried smartphones/tablet, and accompanied by my supervisors, presented power differences. One such memorable interface was when I went with my Swedish supervisor to conduct a Focus Group Discussion at Kakondo Village, Kirumba sub-county Kyotera district. Participants had never seen a research student being accompanied by a supervisor in this case a *muzungu* (meaning "white person"). This created clear differences between the researcher, academic supervisors and participants. Participants were excited about my supervisor's presence, with anxiety to listen to her. To their dismay, the supervisor apart from greeting them was only an observer. The fact that I went to the field by car, with note books, carried smartphones/tablet, and accompanied by my supervisors, presented power differences. The participants reaction perhaps confirms the observation that local elites distribute their knowledge very differently to foreign or local researchers; foreigners are given more information as they easily generate confidence in local elites (Cunningham 1999). Perhaps participants were eager to share their experiences and opinions more with the foreign (my professor) than me a local researcher and student. The participants' mixed reactions; as to why she did not address them also caused fears in me as to how best to respond to their reaction. To address their anxieties, I explained to participants about the objectives of our visit and the rules of game for my supervisors visit not to engage with participants.

The presence of professors in the community also created high farmers' expectations for expert knowledge and skills on best agriculture practices. My interactions with participants was restricted to only data collection and not technical guidance, time and again I explained this at the beginning and end of each interview. In addition, some farmers expressed their pleasure and feeling of pride for their community having been visited by a Professors and PhD student from Makerere University; Uganda's most precious University. This created expectations that this research would be ground breaking to address most of the challenges with agriculture extension in the community. It reinforced the difference in power relations between the research subjects and researchers as elites and perceived experts. I however informed participants about the objective of my study; as purely academic research with no direct interventions that would directly benefit them and address their agricultural extension challenges. I also emphasized that they are the local experts in community with local knowledge, lived experiences and end users of mobile extension services, that is why I and many other researchers engage them. I affirmed that my fieldwork was to learn from my participants, understand their unique experiences and opinions as useful data for my thesis.

In addition, my social status as a PhD student from Makerere University and from the city put me at another position; perceived to be knowledgeable by the participants. This created high expectations from the community, that labelled me *Musomesa* (meaning teacher or extension

worker), and eagerly waiting for technical guidance about their farming practices. This positioned me as a perceived expert (expertise power) with more knowledge and skills, hence a hierarchical difference from the indigenous study community. Farmers often invited me to check on their farms; with eagerness to hear my feedback, especially positive feedback and advise on how to improve on their practices. For example, drought due to adverse effects of climate change, farmer often showed me issues related use of counterfeit agro-inputs, pests and disease; dried coffee stems, infected coffee beans; infected bananas among others. Such incidences would draw my emotions and a feel of loss by the farmers without formal agriculture insurance. On a daily basis I had to negotiate through the researcher-research subject power relations, and not as an extension expert as perceived by the community. Often, I referred respondents for guidance from their professional extension workers, listen to informative radio programs and seek technical support.

Furthermore, the participants expressed disappointments with academic researchers, who don't always give feedback and share their findings with the community. Participants also expressed research fatigue; that over time they have participated in several studies coupled with no feedback mechanism to the study communities and stakeholders. According to the Swedish Research Council, though research has varying relevance: elusive and multidimensional benefits to different end users, it is imperative to connect the question of how research results are made useful to different people (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). I agree with the issues raised by my research participants. Because failure to share research results, discourages community members from participating in future studies, because they seem not to figure out the importance of continuous research, with no direct feedback to participants. Such moments were opportunities for continuous rapport building and educating participants about the value of research in community development. In addition, through follow up and gap filling field visits, I shared some preliminary findings with participants as a way of feedback. Through my field work, I engaged participants about their position and role (opinions and views), and how their varied experiences are informative in development research. This was not an easy position to negotiate due to glaring differences of researcher education, elite-semi-illiterate power relations.

My knowledge of the culture and language of the research community gave mileage to conduct the study with less challenges. The ability to engage participants in their local dialect presented an opportunity for ease rapport building and to gain trust with respondents. This enabled me to manage conversations with participants without translators who sometime distort the natural conversation. As a result, it created a sense of belonging and perception of an 'insider'. I gained the confidence, trust of stakeholders, and established contacts that were very useful during the field data collection; especially in mobilizing participants, recruiting FGD participants and key informants. Participants were more willing to talk to me and welcome me in their homes including giving me directions to the different villages and households. This made me comfortable to easily identify with research subject, but conscious of any prejudices and over empathizing with them.

Long survey questionnaire; some respondents felt the questionnaire was too long and time consuming: 'wasting' their time yet with no direct incentive. The interview took between 45 minutes and one hour depending on participants' comprehension of questions. This was expressed more by male respondents, who felt they were busy and had much work to do than attend to my interview. On the contrary, most female respondents felt comfortable to answer questions, willing to share more stories, even when they are not connected to the study. However, interludes of participants sharing their stories, giving them time to speak out, allowing them to respond to phone calls during interviews, and attending to some urgent domestic tasks and time to have a drink,

motivated many to respond. Although I informed participants about the approximate time the interview could take, it was inevitable to hear such complaints. Some of the sentiments concerning the time spent during interviews were driven by the impression that I should have compensated (paid) for their time. Nonetheless following the recommended good research practices, payment for data is not permitted (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). For a period of nine months, I had to negotiate these ethical dilemmas on a daily basis.

3.2 Research outputs and dissemination

I had the opportunity to present my research idea, proposal, draft manuscripts and thesis at doctoral seminar at Makerere University, University of Turin and Gothenburg University. I had several interfaces with academic supervisors, reviewers and editors of manuscripts from different disciplines and fields. I learnt a lot from peers and senior researchers; whose comments and insights shaped my critical thoughts and analysis. However, some responses and reviews were radically opposed to my preconceived knowledge and field findings. This put me at cross-road to synthesize all review comments for my thesis. Sometimes I would feel empty about my work, with power differences of 'inferior' researcher and superior reviewers. Other moments I felt energized and academically mature to write manuscripts. As an early-career researcher and PhD student, such dilemma and position are worth reflecting upon. Indeed, its challenging to turn research into quick publication that has practical use. The process can be amateurish with the ability to convert research results into practical use due to attitude problems of the various actors towards each other and structures involving slow publication processes, sluggish handling of patent applications and a lack of risk capital (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). These experiences have made me to appreciate research as a process; with backward and forward linkages. Thus, researchers as captains of the research vessel guided by co-captains (reviewers), research ethics, institutional frameworks and academic rules of the game at university and publisher.

4. Conclusions and Recommendation

The above reflexivity and positionality reveal the stronger agency of a researcher to discern field dynamic experiences, engage various stakeholders and research brokers and make appropriate decisions about the multi-level research processes. The study also alludes to the knowledge structures that constrain and facilitated rigorous research without compromising the basic ethical standards and institutional rule of the game. By and large, my research experience was entangled with fluid positioning and reflexive, routine negotiation of power relations with participants, community leaders, academic supervisors, research ethical considerations, requirements of journal reviewers and publishers. This resonates with Sultan's (2007:383) assertion that research involves critical disjuncture between aspects of everyday behavior in the field, University's institutional frameworks, and fieldwork that is contextual, relational, embodied and politicalized. I can testify that my nine months field work was rigorous learning process and energizing academic pursuit.

I contend that social science researchers are entwined in a duality of relationship where on one hand they exercise their agency in everyday fieldwork interactions with the research community. On the other hand, researchers' agency is enabled or constrained by the structural rules of the game such as research ethical standards, academic supervisors and mentors' relations, university systems and publishers' requirements. Social science research is a field of continuous learning, thought-provoking, and empowering academic pursuit and career. Thus, researchers must be aware of the

ongoing power differences, have a positive attitude to the field challenges; evoke their intuition, subjective position as well as observe the ethical practices in conducting good social science research. Thus, knowledge production within the social science field is an interactive, dynamic process which unfolds with the prevails research settings, as well as constructed within the acceptable research standards.

Acknowledgement

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