

## **Insider and outsider researcher positionality impact: Lessons from researching the social construction of HIV stigma and sexual health seeking behaviour within Black sub-Saharan African communities.**

### **Abstract**

This paper is a reflection on the impact of researcher positionality based on lessons learnt following a research study of the social construction of HIV stigma and sexual health seeking behaviour within Black sub-Saharan African (BSSA) communities. Researcher positionality has a direct impact on the quality and nature of study outcomes. Depending on the nature and circumstances of a given research study, the researcher status in terms of position (insider or outsider) can be dynamic and instrumental in the level of participation by research participants. In this paper, we consider three important interdependent aspects central to conducting research including researcher identity, research participants, and the research topic, to assess the impact of researcher status on the quality and nature of the information provided by the research participants. Following a discussion of the impact of researcher identity as both insider and outsider, specific issues inherent in the research topic are discussed including the missing evidence related to marginalised perspectives of the research participants. Also discussed is the way in which researcher status (insider or outsider) directly impacted on how the research participants responded to the questions posed by the researcher. In conclusion, a researcher who is viewed as both an insider and outsider can either positively or negatively influenced the quality and nature of the information given by the research participants.

**Keywords:** Insider/Outsider, Sensitive, Positionality, Researcher, Sub-Saharan African

### **Introduction and Context**

The status of a researcher as insider or outsider plays an important role when conducting a research study, ranging from data collection to interpretation of the research itself (Parashar,2019). There are some biases that can come into the research owing to researcher positionality. This needs to be highlighted within the approaches and any possible impact on the study needs to be explored and evaluated to enhance future improvements (Dery, 2020). It is important to realize the power dynamics inherent in certain interactions between the researcher and research participants, including the research process and the different viewpoints projected by individuals and groups. In this paper, we explore these issues based on lessons learnt following a research study of the social construction of HIV stigma and sexual health seeking behaviour within Black sub-Saharan African (BSSA) communities in the UK.

This research took place in the context of the researcher being a black African male who was a sexual health professional and academic working with BSSA communities the UK. This means that the researcher 's personal and professional identity impacted directly on the research through his position as a researcher and a member of the BSSA community, including the researcher's relationship with the participants in the study. Some tensions arose because of the researcher's identity. For example, as an African man working with male and female research participants from BSSA communities, the researcher touched on some of the contested viewpoints within African communities based on gender differences, power, roles and influence in the marriage institution. These tensions needed to be acknowledged and exposed ahead of the research with a plan in place to evaluate its impact on the research outcome(s) (Parashar,2019; Wray & Bartholomew, 2019). This allowed all the hidden issues

to be explored relating to the researcher position and relationship to the community in terms of gender and contested realities within the African communities. The researcher's position plays a pivotal role in how data are gathered and analysed. In qualitative research, researchers are regarded as the key instruments for amassing data (Couture et al, 2012; Pezzalla et al, 2012). Therefore, the experiences and identity of the researcher have a direct ripple effect on the research outcome. As such, it is imperative that all researchers identify and locate their position in the research prior to the execution of the research study (Corbin, Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). This positioning is key to the researcher's relationship with research participants and the total outcome of the research study. In order to assess the merits and de-merits emanating from researcher positionality the researcher maintained a reflective diary showing his journey from the conception of the study until completion. Autoethnography was utilised to conduct this study (Peterson, 2015). It is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. The approach questions canonical ways of conducting research and representing others and views research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious phenomenon (Harwood & Eaves, 2017). The BSSA communities included in this study emerged and took shape in Birmingham from the mid-1990s up to the beginning of the new millennium. The population is made up of professionals who were recruited from Africa to take up different trades, and refugees from strife-torn states on the African continent. Since the late 1990s, the researcher had worked as a teacher and later as a sexual health professional in Birmingham and the surrounding areas. His professional position at the time of undertaking the research was Ubuntu Lead in the Sexual Health Promotion Service (SHPS). Ubuntu was a local sexual health initiative specifically aimed at BSSA communities in Birmingham. The researcher managed this sexual health promotion service for BSSA in Birmingham within the National Health Service (NHS). All these aspects of his identity had the potential to impact on the outcome of the research study in question. There were aspects of the researcher identity that had a particular impact on the research study, these included the researcher's gender (black African male) researching across the BSSA communities, his professional status as a former teacher in the community and manager of the BSSA communities' sexual health promotion service (Ubuntu scheme). It was important that these issues were managed professionally in order to get the most out of the research. [The key ethical issues that arose and affected my status as the researcher status included the following:](#)

1. The effect of the researcher 's is positioning as a black African male, sexual health professional, on the discussions arising out of focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews.
2. The likely effect of the study on the researcher's family and acquaintances living in the African communities in Birmingham where the research took place.

### **Insider/Outsider Researcher impact**

There has been a wide debate and contrasting perspectives concerning the researcher relationship to research participants and its effect on the research outcome. Researchers have extensively explored issues around shared identities from a wide range of traditions and perspectives including ethnicity and feminism-based research, sometimes referred to as the insider/outsider perspective (Aiello & Nero, 2019). Palmér, et al (2019) observed that it is difficult to avoid the existential fact that we are part of the world that we study. This has led to the subsequent development of what has come to be known as researcher reflectivity (Aiello & Nero, 2019) which recommends working towards better

understanding of the role of the researcher and the impact of the research processes on the research findings.

It should be noted that my identity as a researcher appeared to reach and sit on both sides of the spectrum (insider and outsider) to the research participant population in the BSSA communities. I was an insider as a BSSA African living in Birmingham and a founder member of BSSA communities in Birmingham in the mid-1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. I was familiar with and aware of the issues that affected black Africans settling in England. I was also aware of the social and moral expectations of the communities on me as a black African professional and member of the community. [This position made it easy for me to have an honest discussion using his insider knowledge and status as a black African researcher.](#) However, at the end of the other spectrum, I was an outsider to some BSSA communities. I am an African from Zimbabwe, while Africa is a huge continent with more than fifty-three countries making up the communities that are living in Birmingham today. Again, I was viewed as one of the few Africans who had managed to secure a modest professional job within the public service in Birmingham. This again could have caused me to be viewed by the communities as representing and advancing the cause of the authorities (NHS sexual health promotion) within the BSSA communities, pushing me to an outsider position in the context of the research. [In contrast to the above assertion at times I found it difficult to freely extract information from the research participants owing to my professional role \(Manager of the sexual health promotion service\) and origin \(Zimbabwean\).](#)

The discussion of any issues involving sex and sexual relations among African communities is taboo (Blevins, Jalloh & Robinson, 2019). Therefore, the nature of the study being undertaken was affected by the identity of the researcher. The topic under investigation posed a challenge in discussing certain details with opposite gender research participants for example HIV stigma, sexuality, gender issues and sexual health services among BSSA communities. Access to the research participants and collecting data to inform the research study meant that I was going to interact with men and women from the BSSA communities including fellow sexual health professionals who themselves may position the researcher as either an insider or outsider. On one hand as a male researcher, it was easy for me to have sensitive conversations with male research participants who viewed me as an insider from a gender perspective. On the other hand, I experienced difficulties to discuss sensitive sexual health information with female research participants

Gaining access to a setting for research purposes can be time-consuming and challenging especially when dealing with minority ethnic communities, as a member of that community (Nyashanu and Serrant 2016). It can also be affected by the researcher's relationship to the gatekeepers as well as ethical issues ([Nyashanu and Serrant, 2016](#)). Merriam, & Grenier (2019) states that an introduction to the group by a member is the researcher's best ticket into the community and the trust that the group has towards that member will approximate to the trust it extends to the researcher at the beginning of the study. The fluid nature of my identity (changing to being an insider or outsider depending on the situation) meant that I did not need any introduction by a community member to some of the gatekeepers. However, it also determined whether the research participants and the gatekeepers would view me as an insider or outsider, which may have affected the quality of the outcome of the study. For example, in cases where I knew and interacted with the gatekeepers it was easy to access the research participants compared to where I did not know the gatekeepers. Furthermore, the fact

that I knew the gatekeepers seemed to endorse me as a valued person conducting important work in the community.

It is worth mentioning that in the current research the gatekeepers included the research and development unit (R and D), a formal unit set up by the NHS to assess ethical issues in research and the less formalized community-based groups and faith leaders among the BSSA communities. In light of this scenario, I needed to take into consideration the way I portrayed myself in the research study and everyday life as a sexual health professional and member of the BSSA communities in Birmingham. For example, my initial contacts with community-based organizations to recruit research participants were preceded by questions such as: Who is behind the study? Why was the study focusing on Africans? What benefit was the researcher getting from the study? In this circumstance there is no doubt that the questions posed by the communities indicated that they were viewing me as an outsider representing the interest of the those who had sent me to carry out this research. While discussions with sexual health professionals started with informal chats about the prevalence of HIV in African communities and the possible impact this had on the communities at large. In contrast this conversation indicate that the health professionals research participants may have viewed me as an insider carrying this study to meet the objectives of the wider organisation.

I was aware that my positioning and the trust of participants might also affect the nature of the information that participants chose to share in the focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews (Hayman et al, 2012; Nyashanu and Serrant, 2016). For example, in the research, the I was perceived as an insider BSSA member and participants felt more at ease discussing their views with someone they perceived to be one of them who shares their views and beliefs. Conversely, some felt uneasy about discussing sensitive issues with someone they know and who interacts with them in their everyday lives in the community. As for the professionals, while they were happy to discuss issues relating to HIV stigma, sexuality and gender issues among BSSA communities with a fellow professional, some did not feel free to discuss issues related to sexual health seeking behaviour of the community being studied for fear of being accused of stereotyping. This was the case with professionals who were of origins other than BSSA communities.

Given the close association and established links, an insider researcher has, it was easy for me to access the research participants (Griffith, 2012). Being a member of the BSSA community, the I was viewed as being on an equal footing, minimizing any power imbalance between me and the research participants. This led to the development of a good rapport enabling reciprocity between the myself and the research participants (Rosenberg & Tilley, 2020).). Conversely, insiders coming to research on sensitive issues in marginalised communities may be viewed with suspicion as trying to advance the agenda of the dominant group (Biddle, Sutherland & McHenry-Sorber, 2019). It is against this background that I at times struggled to have access to some research participants.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

The researcher identity and its impact on the research processes including outcomes is regarded as key to research credibility, reliability, dependability and validity by many scholars (FitzPatrick,2019). In all qualitative research, the researcher is key and central to the information gathering and processing (West et al, 2013). Although my identity as both insider and outsider made it possible to extract data from the participants, it also raised particular ethical considerations that needed to be discussed and appraised in the light of the researcher's role. Researchers are committed to tackling

the many global health challenges and inequalities through innovative approaches to research and development encompassing accepted ethos of empirical research and development (Bashir, 2018). This endeavour to push the boundaries of knowledge in the field of human health automatically gave rise to ethical issues emanating from the push exerted. In this research, there were two perspectives that were advanced in relation to how this research was viewed. Firstly, this research study was viewed as positive in that it seeks to improve the sexual health seeking behaviour of the BSSA communities by exploring the silences within the construction of HIV stigma and sexual health seeking behaviour. Conversely, the study was viewed as undermining the cultural authority of the BSSA communities especially when it questions how different members of the community being studied relate to each other and how this might be influencing the sexual health seeking behaviour of the communities (Bauer, Pansegrau & Shukla, 2019). Such issues call upon the researcher and the research participants to strike a middle ground and needed the trust of an insider. [This two-dimension perspective had a strong impact on how the research participants and the BSSA communities were going to participate in the research study.](#)

There was a need to consider the nature of the benefits that communities would yield from research studies in order to provide a plausible rationale for the research to be undertaken ([Pezzalla et al, 2012](#)). In this research, the findings were used to consider implications for sexual health professionals working with African communities and the sexual health services at large, at a time when epidemiological statistics were showing a disproportionate representation of the African population being sharply affected by HIV and sexually transmitted infections. At the time of this research, Africans constituted 30 percent of the people accessing HIV treatment in England, yet they fell below 1 percent of the total population of England (DH, 2013). Developing sexual health delivery for communities using empirical data from research is a clear demonstration of the importance of researchers in health promotion (HPA, 2012). It was therefore important for me to clearly articulate how my research was aimed at reducing the impact of HIV and sexual transmitted infections in the health and well-being of BSSA communities. Thereby triggering acceptance by the community as someone concerned to fix the challenges befalling the communities.

Other issues I considered were the expectations of the BSSA communities being studied. Following the completion of the research, what will change concerning the sexual health state of the BSSA communities? [Will it be better or worse? In the case of no benefits coming from the research, what is going to be the impact? In addition, what will be the impact on other black African researchers following on from this research? The issues emanating from the above discussions are linked to the confidence or non-confidence of the community in myself as a researcher and the research study overall resulting from the initial nature of interactions they have had \(Rice, 2009; Burns et al., 2012\). In the Current study, relationships with participants were formed at different levels i.e., in my interactions with the communities as a member of the wider BSSA community and as a professional discharging his duties initially as a teacher then as a sexual health professional and, later, a university lecturer. However, these relationships continue to manifest themselves at different levels.](#)

Researchers need to be aware of the potential changes in their relationships with research participants in order to manage critical issues arising from the study (Merrill, 2019). This aspect posed a huge challenge to myself, as I could not completely distance myself from the community that I lived in, initially for the greater part of my life in Africa and later for the past fifteen years in England. I would remain in Birmingham (Insider) and continue my professional work in sexual health following the

completion of the study, unlike other researchers who would leave the scene of the research study once the research was completed. Although the fact that I was an insider had made access into the community easy, conversely it also increased the impact of certain issues related to the role of the researcher. Such problems included the inability to distance myself from the field of study (Bashir, 2018) and managing the outcomes of the research. For example, what would be the impact if the research study brought strife and disharmony among the BSSA communities? It is difficult to provide answers to the above-complicated scenarios.

The study was looking at a subject regarded as a taboo by the BSSA communities (Burns et al, 2012). My identity as a black African man, a sexual health professional and a member of the wider BSSA community posed a strong challenge during the deliberations on the subject in focus groups and one-to-one follow up interviews on the subject. The big challenge was the fact that the research was focusing on HIV stigma, sexuality and gender issues among BSSA communities as a challenge to sexual health services including sexual health seeking behaviour at a time when the epidemiological statistics of HIV were at an all-time high among the group under study (HPA, 2012). At times, the discussion went into some unanticipated politically delicate issues, which affected the direction of the research including the intended objectives. More so, research incorporated men and women from the BSSA communities as research participants. The discussions on sexual health seeking behaviour, HIV stigma, and sexuality and gender issues at times evoked sensitive cultural and moral issues including past experiences of the research participants, which was deemed private and confidential.

There was also the potential that some participants viewed the issues discussed as questioning the cultural set-up of the African communities with a view to undermining them (Cornwall, 2017).). This resulted in personal gender-based disagreements on issues around gender freedom and self-determination in marriages and civil partnerships. Some research participants withhold information during the focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews, and I was viewed as an outsider who might spread negative perceptions to the outside world about the BSSA communities. Conversely, the research participants and communities at large had high expectations of the impact of the study especially when they took the view that it was being carried out by a member of their own community (insider). To manage such potential setbacks, it was important that no promises for radical changes were made prior to the research study execution. It was also important to tell the community that the benefits outlined in the research are debatable and depended on many issues in the communities under study.

Fitzpatrick (2019) believes that, as an insider, the assumed understanding between the researcher and research participants is a challenge when collecting data. This assumed understanding may prompt the research participants to omit information from the responses to questions during focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews with comments such as “You should know that” or “You know what I mean”. Such comments signify that something has been omitted on the pretext that because the researcher is an insider, he/she should know what the research participant is referring to. In the event of such comments that assume implicit understanding, probing questions such as “Can you explain what you mean?” was considered to encourage the research participants to elaborate rather than relying on assumptions of what they meant. In many circumstances, they may provide totally different information from the assumption the researcher had (Rahman et al, 2019). Again,

probing can encourage the participants to reflect and generally lead to more detailed descriptions in their own words.

Ensuring analytic objectivity is another challenge to insider/outsider researchers, as participants open their lives to scrutiny and critique through sharing their experiences. Thus, the researchers need to ensure that their findings lead to the development of knowledge (Gomez, 2021). Yazdani, (2021) suggests that, on one hand, insider research improves credibility as it enables subtleties, to which outsiders are not privy, to be recognized and interpreted. However, on the other hand, tacit knowledge of the insider may pose a challenge during data analysis (Rosenberg & Tilley, 2020). Researchers' experiences have a direct impact on the knowledge they produce (Griffith, 2012). It is imperative to make sure that the findings of the research study reflect the experiences of the research participants rather than the experience of the insider researcher (Rahman et al, 2019). This ultimately makes analytic objectivity possible.

The other tough challenge as an insider was to deal with the emotions that come into play resulting from the development of an interdependent relationship between the researcher and the research participants (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). As a result, researchers need to evaluate the impact of the research on the research participants and on themselves (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). [Taking the insider position in this research, the research topic was particularly sensitive for me and the research participants, potentially leading to significant emotional impact \(Bashir, 2018\)](#). It was therefore important that the researcher acknowledged this before starting data collection in order to manage it effectively. Some scholars believe that debriefing is an effective strategy for researchers when dealing with emotional effects emanating from the topic under discussion in the research (Bashir, 2018). Debriefing in a research study can be conducted formally or informally and helps to minimize detrimental effects on the wellbeing of the researcher and the research participants (Simoni et al, 2019). As an insider in this research, there was the potential to experience high emotions in response to hearing participants' moving experiences during focus group discussions and the one-to-one semi-structured interviews. As a PhD student, it was necessary for me to debrief during regular monthly scheduled meetings with supervisors on the potential issues of emotions.

Culture is dynamic and complex and can affect the way a researcher understands information from the research participants (Couture et al, 2012). As an insider, a researcher may be privy to the meaning of certain gestures and mannerisms used by the research participants that could add more detail and value to the data collected. Conversely, an outsider might ignore these silent gestures, affecting the richness of the data collected and the subsequent outcome of the research findings. As an insider in this study, the researcher was aware of some gestures used by African communities to refer to some issues they may not want to articulate verbally. I was in a position to seek further clarification and more detail from the research participants when this happened during the focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews. However, as discussed, my fluid positioning as an insider/outsider may mean that I was not able to read some of these gestures from those African communities he was not well versed in, thereby affecting the outcome quality of the research study.

### **Implications for other researchers**

There is need to understand the nuances and meanings depicted by different actions of the research participants which at times has strong cultural significance. The insider/outsider position when researching is affected by a number of factors which resonates with the cultural and social practices

of the research participants. Furthermore, researchers need to understand the challenges and opportunities that the position of a researcher brings in influencing the quality of the research with a view to mitigate the challenges while positively exploiting the opportunities.

### **Contribution of the study**

The BSSA communities is new on the British demography, and this is the first paper written showing the impact of researcher positionality when researching sensitive issues like HIV and sexual health among the group in question. Furthermore, the paper has also demonstrated how other already known challenges and opportunities for researcher positionality play within the BSSA communities which may inform other researchers intending to research issues among this group.

### **Limitations**

This is one of the few studies conducted to explore researcher positionality among BSSA communities. More research exploring researcher positionality may be needed in future to inform researchers who intend to do further research in these communities. The paper was also driven from a qualitative research study, in future a paper drawn from both qualitative and quantitative study may enable validity and generalisability of researcher positionality and its impact when researching the communities in question.

### **Concluding Comments**

The article critically discussed advantages and constraints on the insider/outsider researcher status and how it influences the research. The researcher status (Insider or Outsider) is never static but dynamic in nature. I was able to be viewed as both an insider and outsider, thereby bringing key benefits and constrains to the research study in line with each slant of the status.

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