

Applying reflexivity in qualitative research: case study of a Nigerian tourism researcher

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Ontology and epistemology influence how a researcher sees the world, and thus approaches their research and interpret findings. This paper reflects on the journey of an indigenous tourism researcher, recording his encounter with his culture and explaining how it shaped his research journey. The researcher also shares his PhD fieldwork experiences and how reflexivity offered an opportunity to negotiate his position. The discussion highlights how a researcher's encounter with their environment heightens subjectivity in qualitative research and influences the nature of the research, their research position and the design adopted. The paper concludes that early-career researchers should be encouraged to tell readers about their background as it enables one to evaluate the quality of findings, contextualize the research and comprehend it critically, which increases reflexivity needed for professional development.

Keywords: *qualitative research, ethnography, reflexivity, tourism, Southeastern Nigeria*

1 INTRODUCTION

When conducting qualitative research, researchers need to establish their position and be aware of its implications on knowledge production (Barrett et al., 2020). By being aware of their position, the researcher's influence on research can be subjected to scrutiny in the process and help reduce bias (Liong, 2015; Lazard and McAvoy, 2020; Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2023). Writing about qualitative research and reflexivity, Dodgson, (2019) noted that the ability of researchers to clearly explain their relationships with participants strengthens the readers' understanding of the findings.

The tendency for a researcher to inadvertently influence the research process will be heightened if they are indigenous to the study area or knowledgeable in the field of research, which was the case at the beginning of my PhD journey. Often, in such a situation, challenges such as exaggeration of assumptions through the illusion of uniformity, politicization of the research process and excessive familiarity with participants might occur (Breen, 2007). Researchers' beliefs and backgrounds can influence the research design and how they collect and analyse data because they enter the field with their real 'self' and remain the main instrument for collecting data (Palaganas and Estacio, 2021). This explains why it is important to discuss a researcher's subjectivity in research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023) and the multiple realities they bring in the process. Such discussions can come through reflexivity.

Reflexivity can simply be defined as the premeditated attempts of researchers to establish their personal values and beliefs, which may impact the way they choose how to carry out data collection and analysis, and the nature of the relationships

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that occur in the process (Blaisdell, 2015; Dodgson, 2019). This explains why reflexivity is one of the key attributes for evaluating the standard of qualitative research outcomes (Frost and Frost, 2021). Reflexivity enables researchers to critically assess themselves and their investigations while acknowledging their impact on the outcome. It is a process that helps qualitative researchers (particularly ethnographers) position themselves as outsiders or insiders (Zhang, 2017) as part of ethical considerations to support the nature and quality of data collected. Ethical issues are part of reflexivity as qualitative researchers have become more conscious of the importance of participants as co-creators of knowledge (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Underwood et al., 2010). Reflexivity requires qualitative researchers to ‘come clean’ when interacting with participants at all stages of the research (Berger, 2015; Valandra, 2012). Valandra identified these stages as follows:

1. prior to and throughout the design phase;
2. in the course of implementation;
3. within the data analysis phase;
4. through the writing-up phase;
5. through the presentation of findings phase; and
6. in the application of findings to teaching, practice and other research endeavours.

While many qualitative researchers are aware of reflexivity, some ethnographers seem to conceal how they identify participants and collect data, or deny the challenges associated with the insider/outsider dichotomy (Joseph, 2013). Qualitative researchers often position themselves as insiders (researchers who are considered native to their case study site) or outsiders (researchers who are considered foreign to their case study site), depending on what the research aims to achieve. How qualitative researchers position themselves in research is important as it is often difficult to get individuals to participate in research and share their emotions or what they think (Truong, 2022). Insiders and outsiders have advantages and the potential to lead to bias, explaining the need for reflexivity (O’Reilley, 2012). In my case, I represented two worldviews: (1) I am considered an indigenous member of the study area; and (2) I am conducting research on a Western topic that I have taught for more than a decade (I have also published widely in Western-based journals).

Based on these considerations, I had to address ethical concerns in my PhD research. I started my PhD journey with the challenge of representing these two worldviews as ethically as possible, which was very difficult. Within the first six months of the research, I encountered sentiments and the tendency to become an unconscious tourism advocate. Therefore, I quickly turned to reflexivity, which is a way of ‘bending back’ in qualitative research (Ravi, 2019). I now reflect on my cultural background and academic journey.

2 MY BACKGROUND: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Growing up in Southeastern Nigeria, home of the Igbo people, is a combination of valued experiences and challenging periods that characterize life in the region. As in every other traditional Igbo society, growing up was a delightful period of childhood fun surrounded by a wonderful cultural background. Such experiences were instrumental in moulding me into the scholar that I am today. By recounting my personal narrative, I aim to enlighten readers about the trajectories that equipped me with the skills of a tourism scholar and qualitative researcher.

2.1 Cultural and family ties

Perceptions of the Igbo people's contemporary world and approach to academic research are shaped and influenced by their culture. Although this culture has been greatly influenced by Western education, the Igbos continue to possess a profound awareness of their cultural values. For example, while the Igbo people enrol their children in formal educational institutions, they also believe in informal learning. As in my case, parents consistently ensure that their children maintain a connection to their ancestral background by encouraging them to visit the village frequently, particularly during festive occasions, in order to reunite with their relations. Furthermore, parents promote their children's attendance at traditional kindred gatherings and public events during festive seasons, which fosters the development of a more profound cultural appreciation and awareness in children. In my case, such opportunities prepared me for future cultural engagement and appreciation in my career. Similarly, the Igbos maintain a strong attachment to the matrilineal lineage, believing that a person's maternal relatives will stand with them in times of difficulty. Several advantages come with establishing a connection with the maternal household.

2.2 Higher education

After the death of my father life became difficult, and the pursuit of a Western education became a challenge. As is typical among the Igbo people, I was taken in by my maternal family. Through their financial support, I gained admission to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) on a diploma programme in tourism and museum studies. During that time, I frequently visited the village in order to sustain close connections and communication with my relatives and to represent my family at crucial meetings. This offered me more opportunities to gather in-depth knowledge and appreciation of the Igbo culture. The diploma course and this cultural awareness influenced my decision to pursue a degree in tourism and Igbo culture (via archaeology). After years of diligent study and effort, I was awarded a first-class honours degree. As per UNN's policy to promote student diligence, teaching employment is automatically extended to first-class graduates. This policy provided the foundation for my academic pursuit as a tourism scholar.

2.3 My teaching experience and interest in tourism

I first heard about tourism when I started the diploma programme at UNN. Tourism had just been introduced as a new course of study, and many prospective university students perceived it as a valuable selling opportunity. When I started my Bachelor of Arts programme in archaeology and tourism I began to appreciate the discipline beyond what I used to know. Sustainable tourism captivated my attention as it was a trendy field at the time. I pursued a master's degree with a focus on cultural resource management and tourism. At that time I became aware that, while tourism and culture are inextricably linked, negative impacts can destroy local people's cultural values, and ultimately influence their perceptions. Moreover, I realized that, although a group of people might live in a community, they might not necessarily share the same perceptions about things. This understanding helped me shift from unintentionally advocating tourism to becoming a reflexive researcher.

As already noted, my undergraduate studies in tourism and archaeology broadened my perspective on cultural appreciation and facilitated the pursuit of my research goals. In addition, I enrolled in supplementary courses on African and Nigerian cultures, including the archaeology of Nigeria, African indigenous technology, and Nigerian peoples and culture. As soon as I started teaching a few of these courses my passion for the connection of culture and tourism grew, which prompted new ideas for the PhD research journey. My training also influenced my approach to the doctoral research on culture, local people and tourism. In addition to the lessons learned during the master's programme, I chose to study the socio-cultural implications of tourism during the PhD programme to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of my local culture. I now share my experience during the PhD fieldwork.

3 THE FIELD RESEARCHER: SWITCHING BETWEEN INSIDER AND OUTSIDER

I was excited about going back to Nigeria for my fieldwork after being away for 17 months in Australia. This nostalgic feeling gave way to apprehension, with the following questions popping into my head:

- What changes might have occurred back home?
- How will I remain ethical in researching a topic I taught for many years?
- How will I interact with participants who may be related to me without influencing their responses?
- How will I report my findings without bias?

Events in the field changed my perspectives on my PhD research as I realized that procedural ethics are different from ethics in practice (Rallis and Rossman, 2012). I began to understand that the type of questions addressed by any institution in compiling human ethics forms regarding ethical considerations often differ from the ethical challenges that occur during fieldwork because of the subjective nature of qualitative research and the reliance on human participants to generate results. I discuss reflexivity at the following research stages to highlight how I interrogated my narrative about conducting tourism research in my native land: fieldwork design, recruitment, interviewing, data analysis and writing of findings.

3.1 Fieldwork design

Before the fieldwork, I reflected on the following questions:

- How can the things I already know about the topic influence my research approach?
- What challenges should I envisage, and how can I address them?
- Who should be invaluable to the research?
- How should I interact with the participants?

Attempts to answer these questions influenced my position during the fieldwork. One effective approach I utilized to maintain reflexivity was to collaborate with a research team while in Nigeria. The team comprised two male and one female research assistants who are native to the region and have years of experience in the field of tourism. The team members were instrumental in steering the interview sessions in most cases

and assisted in transcribing the data. This approach helped minimize over-familiarity between myself and the study group, which I would have unconsciously ignored. This approach is consistent with the view of Berger, (2015) about working as a team to help minimize personal bias in qualitative research.

I operated fluidly, moving to an insider position at significant times by using my indigenous knowledge to identify people to engage in the research and how best to approach them as the Igbo culture requires. At other times, I became an outsider by enabling the team members to commence the negotiation procedure and interview sessions without presenting myself as the lead researcher. In an effort to maintain an impartial stance, I utilized my research training to capitalize on the benefits of being neither insider nor outsider. This strategy both informed participants about tourism and gave them the opportunity to share their own cultural knowledge and views about tourism. We all interacted as co-creators of knowledge with a good understanding that our relationships and actions influence the outcome of the research.

3.2 The recruitment procedure

I adopted a flexible recruitment method for selecting participants by allowing community members to identify their representatives in the research. Previously, Rallis and Rossman, (2012) had observed that the ability of researchers to reflect on what is right or wrong explains their character and guides their actions in a study. Drawing on my insider knowledge, I am aware that men, women and youth have separate groups in traditional Igbo society; so, by allowing them to select their representatives, each group's concerns about tourism were represented in the research. Apart from sampling the opinions of the representatives, I also interviewed tourism officials, traditional rulers and chief priests to capture their views as they are considered stakeholders in the region's tourism industry. After sampling, 216 individuals were chosen as participants for the study. These people were selected because the research aimed to understand residents' perceptions of the socio-cultural impacts of regional tourism in the study area, and whether local participation through collaboration would help manage these impacts.

By adopting a flexible approach to participant selection in the study, I demonstrated that reflexivity aids qualitative researchers in privileging the voices of participants (Underwood et al., 2010). The research team agreed to exclude members in the study area who were not resident in the community on the premise that they might not feel the impacts of tourism development. Drawing again on my indigenous knowledge, I understand how governance works in the area, which explains why participants were given pseudonyms to conceal their identities. Moreover, the practice of using pseudonyms was in line with the ethical approval secured for the research. It was observed that the use of pseudonyms encouraged participants to freely express their thoughts, feelings and concerns during the interview sessions.

3.3 The interview process

During the interviews, as the lead researcher I switched between insider and outsider positions at significant times. I acknowledge that remaining neutral in research is challenging because researchers go into the field with their real 'self'. Being indigenous, I am aware that in a traditional Igbo community women and young people do not openly challenge the views of older men. Therefore, the research team separated

the groups according to gender and age to empower participants to talk freely. We also observed that the traditional rulers influenced the men's responses because of their privileged position, which explains why we interacted with the rulers separately. As a tourism educator, I consciously tried not to be a tourism advocate; my job was simply to explain the meaning of tourism and allow participants to offer their thoughts. There were times when participants did not want to respond to questions on the premise that, as a member of the community, I should already know the answer. There were also times when they were enthusiastic about responding to questions because they felt I could relate well as one of them. At such times, I allowed a team member to take charge of the interview and to remind them that we came as a team for research purposes.

Having taught tourism in Nigeria for more than a decade, I understand how the industry works. Thus, I could relate to the participants' complaints about the attitude of the government and tourism developers. At one point I wanted to make promises to attract investors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to harness their resources and boost tourism development in a bid to alleviate the hardship in the area and improve people's lives. At such time I reminded myself that I was not there as a consultant, developer or tourism advocate. I was only interested in understanding their perceptions of regional tourism development and contemplating strategies to mitigate adverse socio-cultural consequences. By fostering an environment that encouraged participants to exchange perspectives on their culture and gain knowledge about tourism, I effectively served as an intermediary between culture and information. By using reflexivity I was able to negotiate my role during the fieldwork and data collection.

3.4 Data analysis and writing of findings

For analysing the data I chose content analysis, which was not easy for me as an early-career researcher. This is made more difficult by the fact that in qualitative data analysis there is no absolute truth (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). I needed to remain reflexive for the data analysis because ethical considerations transcend the data collection stage (Steffen, 2016). During data analysis I continually went through my field notes to make sure that I presented the participants' comments correctly. I translated and transcribed their responses from the Igbo language into English while trying to retain the idiomatic expressions used to explain key points. I tried not to translate participants' comments in a way that would lose the original meaning. I reflected on how the voices were represented in the analysis due to the predominance of males in Igbo society, and class divisions between rich and poor and between the educated and those with limited education.

I always consulted the field notes to make more sense of the data. There were times when I felt the research team should have put questions differently; and there were also times when I felt the participants gave 'wrong' answers about tourism because of their limited knowledge. At such times I remembered that I was reporting the findings from their perspective, which is one of the strengths of ethnographic research. At all times, I focused on the research objectives and questions because they guide data analysis. The analytical process was iterative to ensure that I was always on track in creating nodes, coding the comments, creating categories and identifying themes. Upon completion of the data analysis, I forwarded the preliminary results to the research team to make corrections where necessary. Their feedback was invaluable

in strengthening the quality of the findings and in ensuring that I did not inadvertently impose my perceptions on the participants' comments.

Last, after the fieldwork and before leaving Nigeria, I organized a workshop to offer participants the opportunity to change or rephrase anything they did not want the public to hear about the research or add anything I may have missed during the fieldwork. The workshop was very productive as it led to rewriting some parts of the transcripts based on further feedback from the participants. These extra steps would have been neglected if I had not made conscious efforts to consider my role as an educator in the field of tourism and a member of the Igbo community, which was supported by reflexivity and adherence to the ethical conditions secured for the research.

By remaining reflexive at the data analysis and reporting stage, I effectively conveyed the viewpoints of the participants regarding challenges impeding the progress of regional tourism development in Southeastern Nigeria in a manner that adhered to professional standards. According to the participants' feedback, large-scale formal tourism has not yet begun in the study area because the government has not demonstrated an earnest desire to collaborate with the local people. By giving the different stakeholders (particularly women and young people) the opportunity to participate in the research, the findings show that the opportunities for youth and women to partake in tourism decision-making have been impacted by cultural factors. The reason is that Igbo culture privileges the voices of male elders during project planning because they work closely with the traditional ruler in policy formulation and implementation for community development.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper shares the story of an early-career tourism researcher's reflection, highlighting his journey and how his environment influenced his research approach. The discussion showed that a researcher's worldview plays a role in shaping their academic journey and interpreting scientific inquiries. The deep understanding of my local culture and acquisition of a Western education placed me in a position that would have inadvertently influenced my research approach, possibly leading to biased findings as I would have ignored some salient issues that I became aware of through reflexivity. This awareness warranted that I step back to interrogate my position and avoid bias in the research process. Being aware of the power and influence that I possess as an educated, privileged, male member of the study group and a tourism educator was beneficial in my research by shaping my decisions and research approach. It is helpful for qualitative researchers to be reflexive as it encourages individual and academic development. Researchers' acknowledgement of their position and unconscious influence in the research process will help readers contextualize the research and understand the findings and the rigour adopted to arrive at conclusions. More early-career ethnographers should be encouraged to adopt reflexivity because it empowers researchers to remain ethical.

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