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The trepidations of a PhD researcher – Who are you and why are you here?

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This paper contributes to research that has a predominant focus on Western researchers in the global South. First, the paper examines how my African identity fits into a Western discourse of being a researcher and their intersections with my other personalities as I world-travel. “World-travelling” is about the plurality of selves and an opening for self-construction. Second, the paper elaborates on violence and intimidation in the field and how researchers may succeed or fail in negotiating such risks. As a non-native researcher in a UK-based University, I acknowledge my plurality of selves and the skills needed to navigate these social worlds.

KEYWORDS
fieldwork, PhD researcher, positionality, violence, world-traveling

1 | INTRODUCTION

The positionality of the researcher can affect the entire research experience and social scientists are being more reflexive about their research experiences. Chiswell and Wheeler (2016) reflect on how the particularities of farmer interviews pose unique and challenging prospects for young inexperienced female researchers. De Silva and Gandhi (2018) reflect on how social networks and relations between researchers and their parents could be useful in gaining access during field research. A report by Scholars at Risk (SAR, 2019, p. 60) documented 324 verified attacks on researchers in 56 countries from September 2018 to August 2019. While much research on risks in fieldwork emphasises gender and the negotiation of gender-based safe spaces (Miller, 2014; Sampson & Thomas, 2003), there is limited research on how race and nationality shape risks in the field.

This paper makes two key contributions to existing work that has a predominant focus on Western researchers in the global South. First, it examines how my African identity[1] fits into the Western discourse of being a researcher and their intersections with my other personalities uncovered by what Lugones (1987) refers to as “world-travelling.” Lugones (1987, p. 10) defines “world” as a social construction of society, and “world-travelling” is about the plurality of selves and an opening for self-construction. It refers to both movements between context and the sense of belonging to more than one world at the same time (Anderson, 2014, p. 640). Second, the paper elaborates on violence and intimidation in the field and how researchers may succeed or fail in negotiating such risks. I illustrate how researchers can be put in harm's way due to arrogant perceptions, stereotypes, and relationships with research partners.

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[1]My African identity extends beyond borders and encompasses the meaning of being part of a people "who know what it signifies when race and [nationality] are used to determine who is human and who sub-human" (Mbeki 2005: 17).

As a Western-educated PhD researcher, there is pressure to respect institutional and procedural codes of ethics, which conforms to the critique made by Jordan and Yeomans that "[Western] researchers are too concerned with reproducing the field strategies inscribed within their academic canon and too little in exploring alternative epistemological standpoints" (1995, p. 393). In the field, the African researcher is faced with expectations of being "African" and with the ethical concerns of Connell, who argues that "southern forms of knowledge do not exist simply to be showcased but is about accepting and learning different knowledge practices" (2014, p. 219). During my research journey, I adjusted my positionality to reflect various worlds and circumstances as a UK-based PhD researcher of African descent and as a necessary part of everyday life.

Fieldwork was done in two purposefully selected villages in Ruvuma Tanzania from May to September 2018, including a three-week pilot visit in December 2017. Fieldwork was done as part of my PhD research on "The contradictions in the political economy of large-scale land investments and human right discourse in Tanzania." During this time, I was intimidated, accused of spying and teaching research participants how to riot. A search warrant was issued for my place of residence, part of my research data was confiscated, and my possessions were mishandled. Finally, my research permit was revoked, all because a powerful social actor did not like the direction they assumed my research was taking. Previous visits to Tanzania in July 2014 and research partnerships developed during these periods also determined the character and safety of my entire research experience.

In exploring my personalities, I make use of field notes and recordings made during my journey from first-year doctoral student to "battle-scarred" field researcher. The paper is structured as follows. First, I contextualise the meaning of "world-travelling" as a useful tool for foregrounding the experiences of "minoritised" people within a Western-dominated discourse of being a researcher and the political nature of my research. Second, I focus on the privileges of researchers as arrogant perceivers and how I navigated these new worlds, especially when they are constructed in ways that the researcher does not understand. I conclude by advocating approaches that improve the responsive capacity of PhD researchers in accessing the non-static and dangerous world of being a social science researcher.

2 | WORLD-TRAVELLING AND THE POLITICS OF RESEARCH

Research is politics. Like politics, social science research is associated with activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing their power and agency within society. For example, my research examines the investment discourse in Tanzania and argues that decades of neoliberal reforms have led to the disillusionment of the citizenry and, according to Amin (2017, p. 154), the systematic exclusion of an agrarian workforce from a capitalist-oriented economy. My research "takes a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and services" (Madison, 2011, p. 7); researchers are never neutral or detached from the phenomena they are observing, even if they think they are (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 3). While such research is relevant as it interrogates relations of power and knowledge, it exposes the researcher to various risks and arrogant perceptions. By interrogating "what is" and establishing "what ought to be," researchers must take responsibility for their thoughts and actions as they travel into the world of the researched.

The actions of the researcher and the inherently political nature of social science research have the potential to distort established social and material arrangements in which the distribution of power is at stake. At best, the researcher is invading various "worlds" ridden with interests (Madison, 2011, p. 63) and researchers must develop self-reflective approaches to alleviate the complexities of these other worlds (Beoku-Betts, 1994, p. 422). Such responsibility comes with questions about ethics and research design needs to accommodate likelihoods of misguided interpretations rather than assuming friction-free access to Other "worlds" via supportive gatekeepers (Cramer et al., 2015, p. 154). The capacity to respond to these "worlds" is vital to the success and safety of the researcher. To Lugones (1987, p. 17), world-travelling is "playfulness." It's a wilful "openness to being a fool" and the skilfulness of navigating social worlds. Put differently, world-travelling rejects "static notions of identity while acknowledging that differences shape people's experiences in negotiating social worlds" (Anderson, 2014, p. 639). As a non-native researcher, researching a country other than my country of origin often attracted much curiosity from colleagues and local authorities in my area of fieldwork. The curiosity did not seem to come from genuine interests in my research, but more from an angle of bafflement, seemingly surprised that I am doing fieldwork in a country where I am not a native. Being a Cameroonian, studying at a UK-based university and carrying out field research in Tanzania comes with both challenges and opportunities.

There are consequences when the researcher world-travels (Madison, 2011, p. 123) and there may be "worlds" that construct the researcher in ways that he/she does not understand (Lugones, 1987, p. 10). World-travelling warrants code shifting, which becomes a skill of mobility and necessity (Lugones, 1987). It offers a productive contrast to the dominant representation of non-native researchers as "different" within a Western construct of the researcher's world (Anderson,

2014; Hull, 2004). That is, it presents "minoritised people" as skilful in navigating different cultural codes and norms and facilitates attention to both dominant and resistant discourses, and people's agency in relation to them (Anderson, 2014, p. 639).

In fact, Anderson (2014, p. 637) argues for new ways of thinking where educational policies privilege cultural differences as a primary analytical tool and assume that "international [research] students" are necessarily different to "local [research] students." In this world, the non-native researcher acquires flexibility in shifting from the "mainstream" construction where they are constructed as "outsiders" to other constructions of life where they are more or less "at home." They are "world travellers" as a matter of necessity and survival. Feeling "at ease" in a world can be dangerous, as it tends to reduce our willingness to perceive the world in other ways of being in the world (Anderson et al., 2017; Lugones, 1987). The next section highlights the privileges of researchers as arrogant perceivers.

3 | THE PRIVILEGES OF RESEARCHERS AS "ARROGANT PERCEIVERS"

As a non-native PhD researcher from a weak State,[2] I am conscious of the balance of power among States, and how my country may remain neutral and incompetent in providing security to its citizens [abroad] in the broader struggle to survive across the distribution of capabilities between States (Kassab, 2015, p. 2). My Cameroonian and African identity makes me conscious of arrogant perceptions as I navigate the researcher's "world." The feeling of being an "outsider" researcher is reinforced when faced with questions that are often loaded with euphemistic undertones in European cities. As Selasi (2014) brilliantly articulates, the question "where are you from?" or "where are you *really* from?" is code for "why are you here?" "and [when] do you plan to leave/return home?" Arguably, Western researchers are hardly asked these questions when "the field" has become a synonym for the South and an experimental ground for Western ideas. Researchers are not a homogenous group.

The sensitivities in the differentiation of researchers are more heightened at a moment when there is a nationwide rise in anti-immigration rhetoric and sentiments in the UK – exemplified in political rhetoric which scapegoats overseas students as a means to meet immigration targets. In 2016, like many international students in the UK, I was concerned by the Home Secretary's decision to crack down on overseas students as part of the drive to reduce net migration (see Travis & Weale, 2016). The assumptions of international students' difference reveal colonial views (also see Anderson, 2014), with consequences for African researchers who are positioned as the African Other. For example, in July 2019 a British newspaper headline stated that "African [researchers are] twice as likely to be refused UK visas" (Bulman, 2019). At this point, "belonging" became an essential component of my research journey. Appropriation, mimicry, and identifying role models became tools for fitting into the research community.

In this "world," there was a failure to identify with Western researchers, who often expect that being a "researcher" grants you unfettered access or that there would be diplomatic fallout if they were attacked in a country where they are not a native. For example, in November 2018, the British media was highly concerned with the case of "Matthew Hedges: British academic jailed for allegedly spying in the UAE" (Nazia & Patrick, 2018). Matthew, a PhD student from Durham University, was accused of "spying for a foreign country, [and] jeopardising the security of the state." In a more tragic case in 2016, Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge PhD student from Italy, was killed in Egypt while conducting fieldwork (see Kirchgaessner, 2016). Giulio was allegedly involved in "sensitive research into labour unions in Egypt and using a pseudonym for an Italian newspaper."

It is particularly worrisome to assume that such attacks on researchers are sometimes unanticipated. In Matthew's case, it was reported that few in the UK's Foreign Office expected Matthew to be given a life sentence for trying to carry out academic research into the UAE's security politics. In Giulio's case, commentators in Italy expressed shock at the treatment of Giulio given the diplomatic fallout that may occur if an Italian researcher were attacked in Egypt. It is the reaction to the attacks on researchers, especially Western researchers that highlights the privileges of researchers as "arrogant perceivers." While Matthew and Giulio's case may be tangential to my experience in Tanzania, it illustrates some level of entitlement with Western researchers, which I may have struggled to relate with as a non-Western PhD researcher. Indeed, respect for European researchers researching in the South comes from historical and colonial realities (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995). I now turn to my field experience as a non-native researcher.

[2]In the global balance of power, the behaviour of weak States can be defined in three folds: remaining neutral, bandwagoning, and appeasing in relation to great powers and their balancing behaviour (see Kassab, 2015).

4 | RISKS IN THE FIELD AS A NON-NATIVE/NON-WESTERN RESEARCHER

Accessing the "world" of the researched primarily entails code shifting and learning the different roles and norms and then choosing to play by those roles or not. It involves having different personalities or characters, or using language and space in different ways (Anderson, 2014, p. 640). It is by travelling into the world of the Other that the researcher gains trust and understanding of the Other (Lugones, 1987). For example, while doing household surveys in a Ruvuma village, my Africanness was valuable in establishing trust as they referred to me as "*ndugu yangu*" (relative). This insiderness increased the chances of gaining access to certain privileged information among village members. I was invited for meals and social events, and participated in household activities as part of the community. I felt at home. In this world, I felt a sense of "fit" because I was humanly bonded and was normatively happy with the norms of the researched.

However, identity is fluid and ambiguous. The researcher may find a particular identity as "rightfully existing there" and "rightfully out of place or uncomfortable" at the same time (Noble, 2005). In this village, my insiderness was also of concern to local elites and the investor, who would prefer that privileged knowledge about the relationship between the investor and the community remained concealed. I was labelled as an "intruder," especially among some local authorities who consciously protected the investor's interests. In the world of these local elites, my non-native status, not my Africanness, was a marker on my identity.

In a well-argued paper, Labaree (2002) elaborately describes a personal account of the hidden dilemmas of entering the field that involved the negotiation of "positional spaces." To Labaree, whether as an insider or outsider, researchers must constantly reflect on their positionality and the implications of their research. Whether or not researchers are independent of sponsors and governments, they often struggle to convince observers of their intellectual independence (Cramer et al., 2015). The political nature of social science research makes it difficult to argue that researchers are free of "conflicts of interest" to conduct objective research. To the local elites, I was foreign and had been sponsored to investigate the investor's activities in the local community. My activities in the community were under greater scrutiny.

I received a call from a public official who requested my presence at the local district office. He sounded ominous. As Hull (2004) argues, skilfulness is needed to negotiate unfamiliar worlds and appearance is the first piece of information available to others in face-to-face interactions (Naumann et al., 2009). It can powerfully influence the perceiver's subsequent behaviour. I needed to morph into the world of the sophisticated researcher. In a study conducted by Borkenau and Liebler (1995) on the relationship between observable attributes and personality, they found that dressing is a valid indicator of the degree of conscientiousness. Indeed, Western ideas gain credibility as universal ideas because we, as African researchers, have learned and applied them so well at home (Haniff, 1985, p. 112). To look assertive and confident may reduce the chances of physical confrontation and intimidation. However, these codes must be contextualised. The danger is that observers may misconstrue assertiveness as being arrogant and provocative.

Tanzania is a society in which there is a high degree of acceptance that people are unequal and the respect for authority is salient (Hofstede, 1991). Other expressive channels of appearance, such as eye contact, knowing when to talk, body language such as handshakes and gestures, are used by observers as information to make judgements (Naumann et al., 2009). What researchers refer to as "the field" is a social unit with normative standards and values. To Lugones "knowing the norms that are to be followed" in a "world" is essential for being at ease in that "world" (1987, p. 12). Researchers must appreciate when it is appropriate to code shift and when it is not (Madison, 2011, p. 123). The onus is on the researcher to properly understand mannerisms and cultural cues and to strive to avoid being perceived as arrogant or confrontational.

After a brief meeting with the public official at the district office, I was ushered into a seminar room where I was ambushed by seven members of the management team of the investment company. The stereotypical African is submissive, humble, and does not challenge authority. As I navigate these worlds, I take along the various intersections of my personalities and I can materialise these personalities at the same time. I can say to myself as an African "I am humble" and as a researcher from a UK-based institution "I am assertive." I was humble; I listened and talked only when asked. Although I was referred to as "gentleman," presumably from my approach during the meeting, the meeting became heated as we progressed into explaining my research objectives. A police officer remarked that "by questioning village members about their perceptions on investments in the area, I was introducing ideas which may cause them to riot." Indeed, some local elites were fearful of a conscious group of impacted citizens whose change in political preferences may lead to more demands for accountability, and inclusion in investment design and implementation. At this point, I was accused of being a spy and disturbing the peace of the country. My legality as a researcher was now under scrutiny by the police.

5 | IMPORTANCE OF GOOD "LOCAL" PARTNERSHIPS

Social connectedness is crucial in facilitating a sense of belonging or comfort in an unfamiliar "world" (Anderson, 2014, p. 644; Lugones, 1987). De Silva and Gandhi (2018) provide an account of using "parents" as agents to gain access to research sites in their "native" country. Researchers often resort to local partnerships, translators, and research assistants to compensate for their lack of knowledge in the language and cues in the "world" of the researched (Leck, 2014; Temple & Edwards, 2002). Although I had taken a month-long course in Swahili, my understanding of the language, cultural cues, and undertones were different from those of a "native." To compensate for my inability to communicate freely (Lugones, 1987), I worked closely with two research assistants (male and female) from the community, and with support from a trusted activist who is also a university lecturer in the area. His role as an activist is appreciated in the village and his years of experience as a lecturer also meant that some law enforcement agents were once his students. While at the police station, my relationship with him eased the tension with police officers. The police were interested in my "legitimacy" and the legal requirements for conducting research in Tanzania.

The subtlety and sophistication of any research approach do not imply "that physical risks to the researcher would not arise from the interaction between research and local political economies" (Cramer et al., 2015, p. 155). Obtaining all formal research clearances and introductory letters does not guarantee incident-free research and "locally dominant individuals and organisations can restrict access in a variety of ways" (Cramer et al., 2015, p. 147). Legality involves "box-ticking" requirements, with relatively less contact with the researched. In fact, because I had all documents, research clearances, and permits (17 in total) required for me to research in Tanzania, this police officer remarked that "I was too organised to be a simple student. I was a spy"! To this police officer, I was too meticulous and different from the stereotypical construct of African PhD researchers, who are often perceived as incapable of gaining credible access to social domains left for the "sophisticated" researcher. In this "new world," my Africanness was foreign. I was too "organised" and deviated from their expectations of an African PhD researcher. My access to the world of the researched was impeded by the "arrogant perceptions" of this powerful actor, and at worst, my life was at risk.

There would be no diplomatic fallouts if this African/non-native PhD researcher were attacked. In this world, I cannot be too comfortable. The closest diplomatic service of my country to Tanzania is in Ethiopia. Concerned about my safety, my university was going to inform the British High Commission in Dar es Salaam that I was in impending danger. Again, as a Western-based institution, my university assumed that the diplomatic power of the British High Commission would potentially make my accusers worried about a diplomatic fallout if I were attacked. As per the protocol, my silence after 6 pm or the use of a "safe word" to my supervisors would "trigger the cavalry," and I would be whisked out of a remote village, 582 miles away from Dar es Salaam. In actuality, I could be dead before any help arrived!

While legality deals with conforming to the law, access deals with issues of familiarity, trust, and consent (Beoku-Betts, 1994), which entails a good deal of empathy and temporarily suspending judgements regarding the Other (Bartky, 1998, p. 388). Although my university has a duty of care, I was aware that I am not British, and the British High Commission may have no diplomatic responsibility for my safety. As a PhD researcher from a weak African State, one comes to the realisation and confusion as both having and not having the protection of their UK institution. I became animated by both "worlds": a non-native PhD researcher and a student from a UK institution.The "simultaneous enactment [of both 'worlds'] can be confusing if one is not on one's guard" (Lugones, 1987, p. 11). It was better to remain insignificant, open to being a fool, give respect where it was due, and use my local partners and networks to ease the tensions.

Negotiating the field "requires a hypersensitivity of one's own previous knowledge assumptions and the positional space one occupies" during research (Labaree, 2002, p. 110). It is very much a part of trickery and foolery (Lugones, 1987, p. 13). My relationship with the "local" university lecturer was instrumental in ensuring my safety. In fact, because he was known in the community, I was set on bail and entrusted in his care until the police investigations were over. However, I eventually received a letter from the district commissioner's office terminating my research permit in the area. I abruptly ended my research activities in Ruvuma and moved to Dar es Salaam, where I stayed for a few weeks before returning to the UK.

In hindsight, my research assistants were never threatened. They were natives, young, and had no "power" to challenge social domains of power in the community. What happened to me was a display of local politics and how powerful social agents could impede access into the "world" of the researched. I was foreign and as a researcher I can document, challenge, and disseminate contravening practices and norms between the investor and village members. As an African PhD student, I can be intimidated and there would be no diplomatic fallout. To these powerful social actors, terminating my research activities would reduce the chances of gaining full access to sensitive and privileged information in the local community.

Although such encounters may constrain research and shape findings, it may also reveal the local political economy in sharper contrast (Cramer et al., 2015, p. 147).

6 | CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that research is politics and researchers must take the impact of their positionality on the entire research process more seriously. Researchers are not a homogenous group and the world of the researcher is a non-static social construction ridden with power struggles. A non-native researcher may fail in their attempt to world-travel if they are not open to self-construction. Constrained as an outsider in a Western-dominated social domain of social science research and left alone by a weak State that may remain neutral when they are at risk, researchers, mainly from the South, must be skilful in navigating the researchers' world.

For researchers who are interested in crossing national and racial boundaries, a Western construction of field research may be deadly. The arrogant perceptions of non-Western researchers as not "sophisticated" enough to be independent can be detrimental to their research experience. Mimicry, appropriation, and code shifting are tools for mobility and they must be open to these realities. Good local partnerships are essential in ensuring safety. What is vital is for PhD researchers and universities to take hindrances and the nuances of being a researcher as part of research and actively pursue improvements in the responsive capacity of PhD researchers. There are always chances for arrogant perceptions and threats posed by the inherently political nature of social science research.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the ethically sensitive nature of the paper, the data and notes that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. A list of permits, introductory letters, and ethical clearances that supported the research are available in the supplementary material for this paper.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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