Positionality: The Interplay of Space, Context and Identity

Rebecca Y. Bayeck

Abstract
This article considers the way in which positionality shifts and is formed during a cross-cultural study to reveal the complexity of the insider-outsider status. As a researcher in a male-dominated game setting, I reflect on the research process and my interactions with participants to show the interplay of space, context, and identity in shaping a researcher’s status. I discuss the process of gaining access to the research site and participants, and data collection in relation to space, context, and identity. The interaction of my identities with space, and context informed my status at various moments. This interplay constructs a complex status of an “in-out-sider”. These findings prepare researchers to pay close attention to the role space, context, and identity play in shaping their positionality. This study serves as a welcome addition to the emerging literature on positionality, and to the situatedness of a researcher status.

Keywords
micro-ethnography, ethnography, interpretive phenomenology, narrative analysis, narrative research

Introduction
Addressing the concept of positionality in research, Merriam et al. (2001, p. 411) stated that it is “determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’”. As such, positionality can shift depending on where the researcher stands at a specific moment, time, or space. The researcher can switch from insider to outsider at any time or any space. An insider has similarities with participants (e.g., cultural background, race, religion, or education), which is inherently advantageous in understanding the culture, while an outsider is likely to misconstrue the culture or practices (Bourke, 2014; Greene, 2014). For example, the outsider’s identity does not align with participants’ cultural background, experience, or race (Chavez, 2008). Yet, being an outsider makes the researcher sensitive to phenomena that the insider tends to take for granted (Bourke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Throughout the process of conducting research, a researcher’s positionality can change (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The dichotomy insider/outside is not always evident. Positionality theory underscores the situatedness of identity (Kezar & Lester, 2010). As individuals, researchers have multiple identities that are fluid, context situated, and inform the positions from which they engage with and make meaning of the world (Acevedo et al., 2015). As Kezar (2002) put it, “people have multiple overlapping identities… [and] make meaning from various aspects of their identity” (p. 96). In other words, a researcher’s identity/position influences the understanding and interpretation of a phenomenon. The researcher is a data collection instrument in qualitative research (Bourke, 2014). As such, the researcher’s cultural background (e.g., gender, education, ethnicity, or race) and beliefs affect the research process (Britton, 2019).

Merriam et al. (2001) noted that researchers assume positions in relation to the researcher and participants’ cultural values and norms. For this reason, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) contend that qualitative researchers occupy the space in-between, where the researcher is an insider-outsider. Researchers have used other terms, which illustrates the complex and blurred boundaries between insider/outside. Chavez

1Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Rebecca Y. Bayeck, Instructional Technology & Learning Sciences, Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322, USA.
Email: rebecca.bayeck@usu.edu

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(2008) mentions total insider (share multiple identities with participants), and partial insider (shares a single identity with participants). Banks (1998) suggests the following: indigenous-insider, referring to the researcher holding similar values, perspectives, behavior, beliefs, and knowledge of participants under study.

The indigenous outsider is an outsider for participants because of the acceptance of the outsider culture (Banks, 1998). The external insider is integrated into the outsider culture, and rejects the values of the community of origin (Banks, 1998). Lastly, the external outsider is not part of the community under investigation, has limited understanding of the cultural values, and integrated into the community under study (Banks, 1998). The use of different terms highlights the role of a researcher’s position/identity in shaping the research process. However, as McDougall and Henderson-Brooks (2021) argue, the approach to the concept of insider-outsider in research should be nuanced, though it is critical in revealing issues of equity. In a similar vein, McNess et al. (2015), contest the “essentialist definitions of the outsider as detached and objective, and the insider as culturally embedded and subjective”, and describe another “liminal” space between the two roles, where fruitful and sensitive understandings emerge (p. 295).

This article explores the concept of insider/outside, and the interaction of space and context with reference to two key aspects of the research process: accessing research participants and data collection. I reflect on my multiple identities (e.g., female, African, and researcher) in order to show these affected the research process. This article also shows how my multiple identities were informed by the interplay of context and space throughout the research process. I explain the interaction of insider/outside, and further show that there is no clear delineation between insider and outsider (Bourke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Defining Space and Context

The concept of space is multidisciplinary and its understanding varies in the literature. Space sometimes refers to an abstract and limitless setting (Ellis & Goodyear, 2016). However, Massey (2002) defined space as a concrete setting, continually being constructed, and consisting of relations and connections among people. Space emerges from interactions between individuals and their physical environment, and is experienced (Bayeck, 2019; De Iululis, 2019). Space is therefore not limited to a physical environment, but includes the various relations between individuals, groups, and material making up that space (Temple, 2018). Space is enriched with meaning, lived, and experienced by people (Massey, 2005). I draw on this perspective as a means to understand space in qualitative research. That is, in this article, space is lived, experienced, and consists of the interactions between people and the environments they occupy.

Researchers in the field of human-computer interaction have grappled with the idea of context. In an attempt to provide an operational definition of context, Dey (2001) wrote:

Context is any information that can be used to characterize the situation of an entity. An entity is a person, place, or object that is considered relevant to the interaction between a user and an application, including the user and applications themselves (p.5).

Though this understanding of context is specific to computer and human interactions, it provides a foundation to draw on when defining context in this article. Hence, any piece of information that can be used to depict the situation of a participant in an interaction is context (Dey, 2001). Drawing on this understanding, context refers to situational, implicit information, and underlying cultural systems that explain and inform the behaviors, actions, and interactions of people in a country or region. Context in this article is broader than space, which is a microcosm of context or culture. Therefore, context in this article also refers to the cultural context, which consists of: “practices, values, interactions, and actions transmitted across generations that are shared and are meaningful at a national or regional level across ethnic groups” (Bayeck, 2019, p. 128).

Research Focus and Context

My crossculturally research explored the literacy practices of adult players of the African board game *Songo*. The question of games being spaces for learning and literacies is no longer posed. An extensive and growing body of literature evidences learning and literacies occurring around and during gameplay (Apperley & Walsh, 2012; Gee, 2018). However, a similar argument cannot be made about board games, and particularly African board games. The emerging literature on board games, learning, and literacies in the field of game studies is still growing (Carter et al., 2014), and essentially focuses on modern board games (Bayeck, 2019). My study focused on an African board game as a means to expand game studies research to other contexts and cultures, and further highlight the intersection of literacies, culture, and learning.

The study was conducted in two distinct cultural contexts: Yaoundé, Cameroon, and New York City, United States (U.S). Drawing on Hofstede’s (2001) cultural grouping, Yaoundé, Cameroon falls under the spectrum of collectivistic culture, while New York City, U.S identifies with individualistic culture. The data collection strategies in this micro-ethnography included observations, interviews, and video recordings. As with any qualitative study, particularly, microethnography, which employs ethnographic techniques (Sutterby, 2015), this research required accessing participants, building relationships of trust, and engaging with participants in a setting they were familiar or felt comfortable with for data collection. Interestingly, in both settings, board gameplay was male dominated. As a female, researcher, and African in male
gaming spaces, my identities interacted with and shaped my field research. It should be noted that context in this article refers to a setting or situation, and activities that people engage in or things they do (Lamsfius et al., 2015). In the following section, I discuss the interplay of my identities, space, and context throughout the research process.

**Gaining Access to the Research Site and Participants**

Research is a cultural process. By culture I mean the constellation of practices, techniques, approaches, and methods historically developed by researchers, and in this case qualitative researchers to explore, study, and produce knowledge. Given this background, conducting crosscultural fieldwork is always challenging, even when the research sites are familiar to the researcher. Moreover, the researcher often applies techniques and approaches to data collection foreign to the study context, which makes crosscultural research and research in general even more challenging. This is often the case when researching underrepresented communities in the field of research (Wadsworth, Supernant, & Dersch, 2021).

As McFarlane-Morris (2020) explains, the researcher is often in the position of “betweenness,” being an insider/outside at different moments during the research process. However, the debate about insider/outside status often stems from a western perspective of the world and research, which emphasizes standard practices and “professional responsibilities to the distant others” (Mandiyanike, 2009, p.64). Non-western perspectives on positionality are still emerging. Though the researcher is always positioned somewhere, delimiting that position is not straightforward (McFarlane-Morris, 2020; Zhao, 2017). This is especially true in situations where the researcher has some level of familiarity with the local culture and the research object.

My cultural background and researcher identity intersected at this stage of the research. In this research, gaining access to the research site meant identifying people in both cultural contexts who could connect me with players. Though Songo (Figure 1) is a popular board game in Yaoundé, with groups of male players across the city, and that I grew up in Cameroon, studying in the U.S made gaining access to the research site, that is, players challenging. Studying in the U.S and being a woman interested in this game made me an outsider. Yet, my understanding of communication practices in Cameroon, given my cultural background, made me, to some extent, an insider. As shown in the literature, it is challenging to consider a person an insider culturally; there is no agreed parameter to determine how much is enough to consider one an insider (Short et al., 2016; Sivashankar et al., 2020).

Connecting with players of this African board game was even more challenging in New York City, where the game is not a mainstream board game. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) explained, access depends not only on theoretical understanding, often disguised as ‘native wit’, but also the discovery of obstacles to access, and perhaps of effective means of overcoming them. Access itself provides insights into the social organization of the setting or the orientations of the people being researched (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

My foreigner status and gender identity added to access challenges. I was an outsider interested in an African board game mostly played by men in uncommon spaces in the New York City. This game, as I later discovered, was played outside on the sidewalk in an area of the Bronx where one could find a great number of Africans, Caribbeans, and African-owned shops.

To overcome these challenges and select the research sites, I contacted a U.S-based faculty from the ethnic group known to be associated with the game in Cameroon. My cultural background (i.e., Cameroon), and my researcher identity allowed me to identify who to speak to in order to gain access to the site and players in Cameroon. For New York City, I used Google, and found the name of an African board game club. The club leader served as my informant, and was able to point me to a site where players of this African board game gathered. My researcher identity informed my approach in New York City, for Google was the doorway to finding my informant and connecting with the site and players in the U.S. The process of accessing both research sites involved distinct approaches informed both by my identities (cultural background and student researcher), and the context where I was initiating this study. For instance, as an international student in the U.S I could not visit player groups across the city to find research sites and players. The scarcity and invisibility of African board game players in the U.S. led me to use Google as the entry point to make contact, and gain access to participants and the research site.

Conventionally, informants are used to gain entrance into a particular setting, of which the researcher may be considered an outsider, as in the case of Songo gaming community in both contexts (Atkinson, 2012; O’Reilly, 2005). Interestingly, in this phase of the research process, place interacted with my identities (i.e., cultural background and student researcher) to shape my insider/outside status, while defining the strategy to accessing the research site and participants. For instance, being a researcher and an international student (i.e.,
Cameroonian student) made me an outsider in the U.S. context. I was neither part of the U.S culture or gaming community in New York City. Moreover, the U.S.-based faculty with ethnic ties to Songo as well as the leader of the African board game club acted as key informants because of who and what they knew (O’Reilly, 2009). Yet, they were what I termed “primary” key informants as both either linked me to another key informant (e.g., Cameroon), or gave me the address of the gaming site (e.g., New York City). For example, my primary key informant for Cameroon, introduced me to a key informant - whom I called “Mon Père [my father]” as a sign of respect - who in the traditional sense of key informant, knew many of the gaming groups in Yaoundé, and had great rapport with the players in the city. Mon Père also knew a lot about the game and its cultural meaning for the Beti/Fang ethnic group. In the context of Cameroon, forms of address such as Mon Père honor the addressee; they are a sign of respect, politeness, create interpersonal relationship, while pointing to the way people interact (Echu, 2008). As Nkwain (2014, p. 190) explained, factors such as age, social status, gender, and social achievement ‘play into the choice of address terms or strategies used by interlocutors in specific communicative contexts [and] … these factors play substantial roles in determining what is considered polite and respectful and what is not’. In this context, the appellation Mon Père served multiple purposes: a) it was culturally appropriate; b) it established an interpersonal relationship; and c) protected the anonymity of participants as expected in research.

Adding complexity to how context and my identities interacted and informed my insider/outsider position, Mon Père accompanied me to the research site, introduced me and my research to the gaming community leader as follows:

Bonjour Président, voici l’étudiante donc je te parlais ; c’est l’étudiante de Prof aux Etats Unis ; elle est intéressée au jeu de Songo pour sa recherche de doctorat, et veut savoir comment ça se joue ; voilà pourquoi je l’ai amenée”

[Hello President, here is the student I spoke to you about; it’s Prof’s student in the United States; she is interested in Songo game for her doctoral research, and wants to know how it is played; that’s why I brought her].

This introduction positioned me as an outsider, a student of the U.S.-based faculty, interested in the Songo board game. However, this introduction followed a culturally-appropriate protocol. In Cameroon, it is a common practice, as well as a privilege to be presented by an “elder”, one respected and known, in this case, in the gaming community. Such introduction meant that I had already been vetted by Mon Père, and could freely move in this gaming space. At that moment, I was positioned as an insider in this gaming space through this introduction. It implied that I could speak to the players and freely visit the gaming space. My cultural background facilitated my understanding of the introduction process, its meaning, and implications for my fieldwork. Being from Cameroon, I was familiar with these practices. My move from outsider to insider status initiated by Mon Père at that moment, was confirmed by the gaming club leader. Thus, this introduction meant that I gained, in this gaming space, an insider status, which the club leader, Président, corroborated as he said: ‘Oh ma fille tu es la bienvenue, sois libre; viens quand tu veux [Oh my daughter you are welcome, feel free, come when you want]’. The ‘ma fille [my daughter]’ placed me in a kinship relationship with Président, making me an insider (Nkwain, 2014). In other words, I was adopted as a daughter, recognized as a new member of the family. Still, as the ‘president’ in this gaming space, culturally, Président had to introduce me, and summarized my research project to other players:

Vous connaissez notre frère ci; voici une étudiante qu’il nous amène; elle vient des Etats-Unis; elle fait sa recherche sur le Songo, et viendra ici filmer comment on joue

[You know this brother of ours; here is a student he is bringing to us; she is coming from the United States; she is investigating Songo, and will be coming here to video record our gameplay].

In the process of accessing the site and participants, the status of outsider/insider intersected with the context and space where each action occurred. Mon Père positioned me both as an outsider (student from the U.S) -insider (c’est l’étudiante de Prof1 aux Etats Unis [it’s Prof’s student in the United States]). By referring to me as the student of Prof, I regained my cultural identity (Cameroonian), thus insider status in this context. My insider status was reinforced by Président when he said ‘Vous connaissez notre frère ci; voici une étudiante qu’il nous amène [You know this brother of ours; here is a student he is bringing to us]’. In the context of Cameroon, frère [brother] implies a kinship relationship, and this kinship is extended to anyone introduced by ‘a brother’ (Anchimbe, 2011). Hence, I was an insider, though an outsider when Président stated ‘elle vient des Etats-Unis; elle fait sa recherche sur le Songo, et viendra ici filmer comment on joue [she is coming from the United States; she is investigating Songo, and will be coming here to video record our gameplay].

My insider/outsider status shifted at different instances or moments in my interactions during my field research. Reporting on her fieldwork in her homeland, China, Zhao (2017) explains her experience of being both an outsider and insider when she returns from Canada as she interacted with different groups. Though she addressed her position from a geographical perspective, her study revealed that the insider and outsider position is dynamic; it can shift at different moments, and in various spaces. Mandiyankie (2009), and McFarlane-Morris (2020) report a similar experience during their research in their homelands, respectively Zimbabwe and Jamaica. The position of in-between, or “betweenness”, that is feeling
as an insider and outsider in context where the researcher should be seen as insider is “not limited to those conducting cross-cultural studies but also affects those conducting intracultural studies” (McFarlane-Morris, 2020, p. 394).

In New York City, identity, context, and space interacted and shaped my status. As an international student, researching in the United States, I was automatically an outsider. Mr. O, my primary key informant who had a good knowledge of African board game players in New York City, provided the address of players’ gathering. Interestingly, in this gaming space, I was an insider because of my African identity. For instance, at my first visit, I introduced my research and myself as follows:

Good afternoon, my name is Cameran. I am a student at this University doing research on Warri. I would like to video record and interview players of this game.

Instantly, one of the participants told me “You are African! From which African country?” “Cameroon”, I replied. In underlining my African identity, the participant seemed to stress my outsider status, considering the context. However, he added:

you know this is an African game! One of the best players here is from Ghana. You should wait, and you will see him! You know the game, but we are from Antigua. We play on weekends; nobody is here today; come next weekend, you will probably meet us and some of the best players.

Mentioning the African origins of the game, he positioned me as an insider. As an African, I knew the game, and referring to the Ghanaian player as one of the best players was another indication of my insider status in this gaming space. During data collection, players assumed I knew the game rules, and did not explain the game to me, unless I asked for an explanation. For instance, while playing, one of the players will say to me “did you see what I did?” Or a member of the audience will say to me “you see what he is doing”. Interestingly, in this space, my insider/outsider status merged, evidencing the interaction of space and identity in informing a researcher’s status. Our backgrounds and experiences position us as either insiders or outsiders in relation to the experiences of others (Sivashankar et al., 2020). Still, the interaction of space, context, and identity also participated in establishing my status. My insider status was further stressed when participants told me about the board game being kept in a shop owned by an African. Players also made sure that I knew that there was an important African community and shop owners around. I was in a way, not a stranger in this gaming space, and to some extent an insider because my presence, as an African, in a space where other Africans lived and interacted with them, made me part of the community.

My position shifted from insider-outsider, merged, and the instances of being both insider and outsider were not just as Merriam et al. (2001) stated “relative to the cultural values and norms of both … [me] and the participants” (p. 416). The interplay of space, context, and identity framed my position, which altered given the space, context, identity, and their relationship.

Collecting Data

An important phase in the research process is data collection, which builds on the rapport the researcher developed with participants. The process of building connections for fruitful research relationships has generated ethical questions concerning deception, “faking” or bending the rules (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002; Oscar et al., 2018). However, in this section, I focus on how space, identity, and context intersected in constructing my status, and in shaping data collection.

In Yaoundé, my cultural background facilitated my rapport with participants, who treated me as a member of the community. In this context, my fluency in French, and other local languages allowed me to participate in the gameplay through comments, which further positioned me as an insider on the insider-outsider spectrum in this space. Nonetheless, as a woman in a male gaming space, I was evidently an outsider. Songo is a game played by men in Yaoundé; and even though I was seen as a member of the community in the context of Cameroon, my gender identity made me an outsider in this gaming/Songo space. As a result, players (without being asked) made it a duty to explain rules and practices of the game, which contributed to the data collection. For instance, while playing, participants often asked whether I understood a player’s move, and provided me with the opportunity to ask questions. Interestingly, my outsider position in this space created the opportunity to learn more about the game and gain insights into the cultural and complex meaning of some gaming practices. In my conversation with Vince during the gameplay, he takes time to explain the basic rules of the game:

Vince: Le songo est un jeu intellectuel et qui se joue à l’aide d’une case comme celle que vous voyez là, il y’a 70… un tableau qui comporte deux rangées de 7 cases et le principe c’est de euuuuh le principe c’est de chercher à bouffer 2, 3, ou 4 pions au maximum

[Songo is an intellectual game that is played with a board like the one you see here; there are 70… a board made of two rows of seven holes and the goal is to euuh, the goal is to capture at least 2, 3, or four pebbles/seeds]

Researcher: ok

Vince: et chaque case contient en fait cinq eeuuh cinq pions

[and each hole contains five pebbles/seeds]

Researcher: yes

Vince: donc le jeu compte en tout 70 pions. Donc, quand on fait euuuuh 5x euuuuh, 5 fois, 7x2 ça fait à peu pres 70, alors
[so, in total it is 70 seeds/pebbles. So, when you multiply 5x eeuh 5 times, 7x2, it’s approximately 70, so]

Researcher: donc, là maintenant 35 pions pour chaque joueur

[so, 35 seeds/pebbles for each player]

Vince: oui 35 pions pour chaque joueur

[yes, 35 pebbles for each player]

Researcher: ok

Vince: donc, chaque joueur va chercher à avoir le maximum de pions possible quitte à avoir plus de 40 parce qu’on gagne à 40 pions

[so, each player will try to capture as many pebbles as possible even if it means having more than 40 because you win if you have 40 pebbles/seeds]

My gender identity also informed how participants chose to refer to me. I was “ma fille [my daughter]”, which meant, as previously stated, that I was part of the family in this gaming space, bridging the outsider position (Nkwain, 2014), while pointing to the relationship of power and respect that existed. This term also implied that I was seen as the youngest person in this space by players, deserving of protection and care from all players. Africans conceive age as a privilege, and being old, older than someone, or the oldest person in a community confers a social status, and imposes respect (Mbele, 2005). Hence, ‘Ma fille’ encapsulated the power dynamic between participants and the researcher, while offering the status of the gaming community member. As ‘Ma fille’, I was allowed to call upon any player for clarification, to be shown the game intricacies, and to be introduced to renowned Songo players in the city of Yaoundé.

The interplay of context, space, and identity in New York City further evidenced the complexity of positionality. My international status made me an outsider in the context of New York City. However, in the gaming Warri space, my identity as a researcher from a top-tier institution as well as my African identity emerged and influenced data collection. For instance, more than once, one of the participants, Delva, marveled at the fact that researchers from my university were interested in the game. Throughout the field research in this space, participants often inquired about my advisor satisfaction with the data collected. My researcher identity in this space positioned me as an insider in the context of New York City further evidenced the complexity of positionality. My gender and African identity interacted in this Warri space and American context as participants chose to call me “sister”. This address showed connectedness with participants; my adoption into this gaming community, and my insider status. Indeed, calling me a “sister” was for the Antiguan players an acknowledgment of my African identity. They often reminded me that their ancestors came from Africa, I was “a sister”. Similarly, the African origin of the game positioned me as an insider in the eyes of players. As an African, players assumed I understood the rules of the game, and did not see the need to explain their gameplay, with the exception of the Ghanaian player. It should be noted that in the American context, kinship terms like “sister” fall under what is called “fictive kinship” in the literature (Taylor et al., 2022). Fictive kinship refers to a social network of unrelated people who are assigned titles and given the same obligations and charge as family members (Cross et al., 2018). Fictive kinship practices are common among African Americans and Black Caribbeans (Nelson, 2020; Taylor et al., 2022). Thus, being called “sister” showed connectedness and closeness with players. This implied that I was to be treated as a sister, and players’ behavior was to reflect kinship connection. Indeed, during the data collection, players acted like “big brothers” toward me. As shown in the following excerpt:

Delva: there are other guys who play up there, but I mean

Researcher: I was there but I did not see anybody

Delva: where at 845 East Street?

Researcher: yes

Delva: it is indoors, it is kind of a euuh tough area, so it won’t be, a lot of smoking going

Nikki: it’s not good for you, don’t go there…

Researcher: ok

Delva: yes, don’t go there

Participants clearly felt visiting the other gaming community was not safe for me. It was “a tough area”, meaning it was not safe for me as a woman to visit the place, or conduct my research there because there was “a lot of smoking going”. Though we only met during the data collection, their behavior showed that they cared, and felt responsible for my safety just as they will feel or behave toward a blood-related sister. In Caribbean cultural context, kinship terms such as “sister” express the existence of bonds, as well as the position of the hearer rather than his/her personal identity (Heron, 2019; Mühleisen, 2011). In this context, “sister” reveals players’
positionality toward the researcher, and the bond existing between participants and the researcher in this space (Mühliesen, 2011; Mühliesen & Migge, 2005). As a “sister”, players gave me suggestions on locations not to visit for data collection, while ensuring that I had enough information to meet my research needs. In this space, the address ‘my sister’ instead of ‘sister’ came from the only Ghanaian player (DePaulo), which highlighted my peculiar relationship with this player in this setting. As a Ghanaian, I was his sister, an address term that positioned me both as an insider in relation to him and as an outsider vis-à-vis the Antiguan players in this gaming space. Our kinship was not narrowed to the African diaspora community as it was with Antiguan players; it was directly associated with our specific African roots which allowed us to discuss politics and soccer on the continent. This also meant that for DePaulo, as a female, I was an outsider in the Warri space because men predominantly play the game in Ghana. Consequently, as players in Yaoundé, he spontaneously explained the game rules and moves during the interview and gameplay.

Researcher: so, what’s it is that it’s so interesting, what is in that game that is so interesting to you?

Depaulo: When we are playing and you’re watching, it’s like you know, the whole marbles are 48, the winner must get 25, if you get 24-24, you’re tie, so nobody wins. The winner must get 25 and over, so, when you try to get more than 24 that’s where you apply the technicalities

In Yaoundé, Cameroon, my African identity, international status, and even researcher identity did not surface as factors informing the data collection process. The connection of context, space, and identity influences positionality. The complex interactions of space, context, and identity (e.g., gender, African, researcher) informed and made inextricable the positions of insider and outsider. I was not occupying the space in-between (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009); neither was an insider/outsider (Merriam et al., 2001). My position was that of an “in-out-sider”, that is both at various moments or instances of my fieldwork because of the intersections of space, context, and identity. In other words, my position switched or changed from different moments as I interacted with context, space, and my identities. This change in status was happening in the moment. Contrary to the broad and predetermined conception of outsider/insider, I was rather “in-out-sider” in different instances.

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to show how my positionality was informed by the interplay of context, space, and identity at different phases of the research process. In doing so, I have shown how the insider/outsider position is complex, and certainly goes beyond the idea of dichotomy, the space in-between to make a place for “in-out-sider” as a result of the interaction of space, context, and identity. Researchers carry their identities like tortoise shells (Riessman, 2008). Yet, I add that these identities are manifested, shaped, and enhanced in relation to the context and space of the study. During my research, my multiple identities were revealed, with some being more prominent than others given the context, space, and the intersection of both. The complex interplay of identity, space, and context that inform my positionality shaped the research process, and showed that positionality is not necessarily a spectrum, or something in-between. A researcher can experience both status at the same moment when other factors such as space and context are considered. This is not applicable to cross-cultural research only, but to other qualitative research approaches. I argue that this cross-cultural study helped bring to light the interconnectedness of space, context, and identity in shaping a researcher’s positionality. For this reason, qualitative researcher discussing positionality should reflect on space, context, and their intersection with identity in informing their positionality. This study aligns with research that increasingly challenges the insider/outsider divide in research context (McDougall & Henderson-Brooks, 2021), and further explains the interaction of research with the cultural context (Bayeck, 2021). Hence, researchers should be cautious of the implications of the “in-out-sider” on the research process. As shown in this study, a word (e.g., ma fille/my daughter or sister), and cultural practices such as the process of introduction can position the researcher as an insider or outsider in the same moment and in different spaces. The same applies to the identity that shifts as the researcher is situated in a specific space or context. Researchers should be more alert and aware of the subtleties and intricacies encountered when conducting research when defining their positionality, and distance themselves from broad conceptions of their status. This article does not discuss the power relation between the researcher and the researched in relation to space, or context. Further research should investigate the intersection of power and positionality in relation to space and context in qualitative research.

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ORCID iD

Rebecca Y. Bayeck  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8352-7331

Notes

1. Prof refers to the U.S-based faculty from Cameroon, who is a native of Yaoundé, and known by players.

2. Name of the board game played in the Caribbean islands with seeds/warris and on a board with many holes just like Songo.
3. Language spoken by participants during gameplay. Antiguan Creole is a distinct creole spoken in Antigua, which results from the historical settlement of the island (Avram, 2016; Ballester, 2016).

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