

# Problematizing Identity, Positionality, and Adequacy in HCI4D Fieldwork: A Reflection

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## ABSTRACT

Ontological and epistemological differences between Western and non-Western traditions makes investigating and understanding other cultures using stereotypical (Western) approaches and methods rather difficult. At the intersection of a crisis of identity, epistemic positionality and cultural adequacy, this paper reflects on the ethical and methodological implications of the practices of HCI4D fieldwork that seek to decode and deconstruct the mundane practices of designing and deploying educational technologies in Nigeria. The reflection identifies a range of issues concerning the limiting relevance of conventional methods of undertaking field studies in Africa, while also showing the appropriateness of indigenous approaches. This has significant importance for the practices of those wishing to work in/with African communities in design projects.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centred computing** → Human computer interaction (HCI); HCI theory, concepts and models.

## KEYWORDS

African HCI, Identity, Positionality, Reflexivity, Relationality, Reciprocity, Fieldwork

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the emerging subfield of ‘African HCI’, there has been considerable interest in examining how HCI has approached the global south, and, in turn, how the global south has approached issues of designing and using technologies. There has also been a move towards the presentation and representation of diverse voices and stories (mostly marginalised), not only through the lens of socio-economic development but as an integral part of the cultural practice of design. This has led to the juxtaposition of indigenous practices and

knowledge in articulating how technologies can be designed and developed [4, 8]. It is presumed that doing so could bring about a community wider awareness of how design innovation can bring about structural changes that leverage, support and extend existing inspirations and networks through and by the practice of design.

Regardless of the utopian vision of technology as a means and possible ends for socio-cultural development, there has been limited, if any, discussion about the axiological, epistemological, methodological implications/consequences of the methods and approaches adopted in investigating African realities and concerns. This is not simply a critique of how mainstream approaches of framing research problems and their analysis in real-world settings get carried out, but one that seeks to examine how a range of conflicting and relational themes determine (and might even undermine) indigenous practices of knowledge in Africa. The themes relate to the issues of the crisis of Africa(n) identity, and the re-searching and re-assessment of its complexity and performativity in interdisciplinary disciplines like HCI [18, 21, 38, 41]. Other themes include the theoretical and methodological positionalities of co-researchers [15, 29, 31]; and the adequacy and vulgar competence of researchers and their methods in the practice of knowledge production [16, 35]. How these issues are contextualised in the thinking and doing of either design or development fieldwork in African HCI are rarely addressed. This paper, therefore, attempts to consider how such issues affect the practices of knowledge production and the knowledge produced – as a precursor, perhaps, for the decolonisation of mainstream knowledge in Africa [3, 30]. Such a mode of approaching neglected perspectives goes beyond the simple dichotomy of mainstream/indigenous knowledge and moves towards embracing the similitude and difference of agents, with their agencies and subjectivities at different levels of knowledge.

To outline ways through which we, as an epistemic community, can support and empower indigenous practices of research, this paper reflexively approaches the issues identified above to proffer prescriptions for recognising situated sensitivities in the organisation and accomplishment of fieldwork. This includes a set of mundane attributes for attending to the routine aspect of members groundwork in the field, thereby allowing for a way of detailed analysis and reporting of the social world without the burden of theorizing. These attributes are important and resourceful instruments for the inclusion of localised imaginaries of research-as-development and the empowerment of indigenous paradigms of research-as-sustainment. In essence, the paper seeks to sensitize the community to the political and material implications of adopting a ‘standpoint methodology’ [1] that recognises and extends indigenous philosophies, ontologies, axiologies and epistemologies. In essence, the central focus concerns the need to consider and commit to the philosophical doctrine of ‘relationality’ in the practice of technology design and deployment [10, 40]. It also seeks to evoke

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new possibilities for researching without the reappropriation and reproduction of dominant and imperialistic tactics of research.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, the paper situates the complex issues of identity, positionality and adequacy within the broader context of methodological debates in postcolonial indigenous research, and in African HCI. It then reflects on the experiences of undertaking fieldwork in Nigeria as a way of sensitizing the relationship between indigenous practices of education and technology design. The paper concludes by pointing to sensitivities attending to situations in the field, thereby moving towards an epistemic community of practice that extends the ethics of ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ with care in HCI [19].

## 2 BACKGROUND

History has taught us time over time how imperialistic traditions of the presentation and representation of non-Western perspective as the ‘Other’ portray the underlying ideologies of Western thought systems. Learnings from earlier Anthropological studies and recent Science and Technology Studies has stirred a deep sense of suspicion and resentment towards neo-colonial and neo-liberal ideas about the representation of African relations in contemporary literature. Regardless, recent political opinions have emphasised that the next decolonisation project in/from Africa is about indigenous practices and knowledge [30]. This goes beyond the possibilities of decolonising research methodologies and methods in various communities [40] to the question of what it takes to undertake any form of study in diverse African communities [23]. Some have posed whether it is moral and ethical to study Africa with colonial instrument and tactics? [25]. Or whether there is a link between African identity and the geopolitics and situatedness of knowledge? [3, 23, 28]. Such a question poses onto-epistemic challenges to the ethics of African liberation and transformation. This is not an essentialist characterisation that studies embedded in the African context ought to be examined by, exclusively, Africa(n)s. It, however, points to some of the prevailing issues concerning the politics of identity and knowledge production in African studies [28], and specific to African HCI [41]

However, it becomes pertinent to examine how an ontological and axiological constitution of identity can be made relational to doing social ‘good’ in African HCI. Staying with the trouble here is mainly about how existing frames of presenting and representing the meanings of African-ness identity can be made operative and normative [28, 45]. Or, rather, developing alternative discursive spaces where issues of identity and positionality are placed within the practice of knowledge production, be it global or local to Africa [24]. This denotes that positionality is constructed and known in relation to the culture of identity politics and within the context of its practice and performance.

In addition, the politics of identity focuses attention on the methodological implications of theoretical positionalities and a researcher’s socio-ecological stand in producing and maintaining power relations in multi-cultural settings. The issue concerning positionality is a slippery and dynamic relation across boundaries, which to some extent determines the initial adequacy and competence of co-researchers in the field – either as an insider, in-between, or an outsider [17, 22, 32, 46]. These attributes are indicators that

bring forth a range of underlying issues in the processes and practices of research. Whilst the literature has shown the complexities of national identity and epistemic positionality [17, 32], precariously expressing and producing belonging and otherness in one’s own broader community [14]; what is limited in the African HCI literature is an understanding of how issues of unique adequacy and vulgar competence of ‘home comers’ entering and exiting the field are contextualised. The question is of how one’s identity and positionality can provide support in identifying the structures in the organisation of the social realities being examined. Or how such politics might raise a range of ethical and methodological dilemmas concerning the risks in homogenizing or differentiating taxonomic criteria for the study of Africa.

In essence, the reflection-as-in-practice would account for how to undertake an interdisciplinary field study in non-western context [37], and specifically in Africa. The reflection would raise questions and point to ideas that might suggest that the decolonisation of the study of Africa ought to begin by identifying where the production and consumption of Africa knowledge take place, and how it can take place when power relations are co-located and co-distributed in the presentation and representation of knowledge [30]. Doing so could further evaluate the awareness for the need to identify and recognise the cultural norms, language rules, and customs of the communities one wishes to engage with; not from one’s ontological stand, but from the collective of the inhabitant of the field. This identifies issues at the intersection of identity, positionality and adequacy in the practice of knowing and doing good research (research with care) in HCI4D.

## 3 THE FUN AND DILEMMA OF SOCIAL COMPUTING FIELDWORK IN AFRICA

There are a bunch of well-meaning texts that can guide the interdisciplinary researcher’s in their thinking and doing of field studies. While working across the boundaries of different disciplines (at the intersection of Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), Human-Computer Interaction for Development (HCI4D), and Computer Supported Co-operative Work (CSCW)), one gets into the field with a bag full of sensitivities that either get neglected, practised or reproduced. As part of a Research Method and Advance HCI postgraduate course, I was taught the basic (Western) research paradigms and methodologies needed for the analysis of diverse communities and users. There was no mention of ‘indigenous’ or ‘decolonisation’ or ‘third world’ options. This left me dissatisfied, wondering that maybe there was a need to decolonise the curriculum in the department. In conversations with experienced researchers, I became aware of how qualitative research methods are practised slightly different in a range of disciplines (e.g. [6, 36]). Working at the intersection of institutions and disciplines, one is faced with the dilemmas of interdisciplinarity, and the need to consider eclectic methodological standpoints in research. The ‘fun’ part of the experience lies in the possibilities of discovering or reinventing new insights about member’s organisation and meanings of the social world. The difficulties, or ‘messiness’, can be enormous but productive, ranging from the mismatch between theory-practice, and

the nuances of multi-cultural engagement (i.e., issues of social access, logistics, rapport and support, power relations, socio-cultural differences, safety, language barrier and so forth) [6, 36, 37].

While reflecting on my research experiences, attempting to identify the meanings of doing impactful HCI research in/by the so-called ‘marginalised’ communities, I began to rethink the framing of my PhD research methodology and its relation to the idea of ‘doing good’, ‘making a difference’, and inspiring or bringing about sustainable development (from which condition, through which means, under who’s labour, at what expense, towards which ends and so on) [5, 33]. These raised a range of questions for mainstream developmental research. A classic example is the One Child per Laptop Project [2], which was globally portrayed as an educational project and not a technological one. Lessons from the project point to the unintended consequences of considering technology as ‘the solution’ and technologist/researcher’s as good-doers, whose rhetoric dismisses and denies diverse interpretation of what the essence of technology might mean and imply. What interests me here is how recollecting and reconsidering my experiences points to scenarios where power-knowledge relations are enacted and practised.

### 3.1 Fieldwork Context

The context of the empirical research that informs this paper relates to how postcolonial practices of technology design and deployment embody power relations that produce new colonial ways of (de)futureing in HCI. It is not a historical analysis of the approaches to the design of technologies in HCI4D, but more concerned with the cultural and political practices that inform the practices of a range of stakeholders in the design, adoption and use of technology in Nigerian higher education. The field studies were carried out during the period of June-July 2018 and May 2019, with a range of stakeholders in three universities and three educational technology development companies. Whilst in the United Kingdom, staging the research project and subsequent fieldwork, I might be considered a pre-field worker, examining the arguments of the literature and identifying problems that need investigation. While planning and designing the field study, I might be considered as beginning to enter the field with my imagination of the work I envisaged to undertake in Nigeria – ‘Home’. The initial engagement with potential host institutions/companies (in seeking ethical approval to engage with members of their establishment) might be considered as beginning to practice some vulgar competence in according the adequacy requirement of becoming a ‘field homework(er)’. Developing member meanings through the practice of ‘show and tell’ – specifically from the ethnographic stories developed – might be considered as beginning to exit the field. Possible scenarios where one might be considered a post-field worker would be when the research findings have adequately accounted for and represented the home worked. As research is widely considered a continual activity and process of engagement with the relevant literature or research participants, the project might not halt, and the conversation continues.

### 3.2 Methods and Approaches

The methods adopted were largely qualitative, consisting of interviews, conversations, focus group discussions, talking circles, rapid ethnography, seminars, and contextual inquiry. In the field,

I initially interviewed experienced researchers, educational manager, lecturers, and software developer/designers. I also conducted focus group discussions with students. During the follow-up fieldwork, I validated the initial interpretation of the data collected with students, lecturers, and designers/developers using a talking circle method. I also ran two seminars where I discuss some earlier interdisciplinary dilemma’s I faced while deciding on the methodology and method to adopt for the remainder of the research. This was meant to identify the adequacy of the method adopted and planning to use for subsequent data collection and analysis. Insightful questions were asked and feedback provided that inform the scoping of the research and the practice in the field<sup>1</sup>. Within the virtue of relationship building, the seminars were regarded as clearing ground for doing things with a matter of indifference to prior theoretical framing and of coming to know what matters to community members. This makes the level of competence in the research processes and activities to be co-located and co-distributed among co-researcher, thereby relearning new ways of attending to the mundane aspect of the member’s work, as recently identified by [37].

I also conducted a rapid ethnography with one of the technology companies where I observed and recorded the usual everyday work that goes on in the setting. I then observed and conversed with students and lecturer’s as they used eLearning tools to undertake certain educational processes and activities. I audio recorded our conversations took field notes and photographs and examined contextual strategy documents. For analysis, I adopted a grounded approach to the analysis of data after member checking, stepwise replicated emerging themes and engaged in intercoder agreeing of common themes. I developed thick descriptions from the ethnographic account and synthesised the stories with earlier themes developed and validated during the initial study. To be reflexive in my presentation and be relationally accountable to member’s meanings from the inevitable selective ethnographies, I forwarded the descriptive stories developed to participants as a means of dialogically determining whether the narrative represents a praxeological account of members’ situated practices of undertaking and accomplishing software projects.

## 4 OF ‘BELONGING’ AND ‘OTHERNESS’ – CRISIS OF AFRICAN-NESS IDENTITY

I am a Nigerian, a Northern Muslim by geopolitical association. The North is diverse, deeply multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual. Like any multi-ethnic society, and specifically, one that was amalgamated by colonial assumptions and forces, there is an ethical dimension to one’s mode of self-identification and the meanings of self-identity [45]. The politics of identity is one that suggests how

<sup>1</sup>Some of the questions asked of me related to adopting prior theory or lack thereof – “are you advancing a new theory through your research methodology or is it that indigenous societies cannot be theoretically moulded our that our situations cannot be theoretically explained?”; to questions about the homogenization of Nigerian cultures and the efforts towards decolonizing HC I– “Can you scope the study to a cluster or category of learning cultures. . . Is there a shared and African-wise philosophy of education?...If you look at some African’s, they are more Europeans than Africans, that is why I am talking about the homogeneity. If you have laid the ground well, we would have understood the methodological dilemma you are facing. . . I wanted to see what a colonised HCI is about and what we need to do to decolonize within an African context. I think you assume too much of us to know, we in computer science are scientist and are not interested in the social sciences”.

power constitutes, constructs and reproduces the construct, identifier and meaning of identity in knowledge production. Being aware of my Northern associations, my PhD advisor wondered about the methodological implications of situating the research within the framing of my supposed adequacy as a Northerner, in term of the affordance of cultural affiliation to issues of accessibility, rapport and limitation of resources. Focusing on the Northern part of Nigeria might suggest that the 'Northern' identifier takes precedence over nation bound identities as a Nigeria. It becomes inevitable that one can either be considered as either an 'insider/outsider within', or across/along boundaries of othered relations. This is not asserting belonging nor making a strong sense of otherness but pointing to how being a Western-trained researcher might place one across and along conflicting boundaries in one's own community. The complexities of such an assertion have been reported by other homeworkers/home comer researchers in Nigeria [17, 32]. Where does this leave us as regards conceptions of an African-ness identity and crises of belonging and otherness? I approach such a question by reflecting on historical structures that inform my knowledge of identity politics. The accounts provided to address these questions are not values free, they are ultimately selective and can be considered as bracketed by the imaginaries of recollection and the locale of reporting.

The relational aspect between belonging and otherness in identity politics could be either maternal (growing up in an extended family), socio-cultural (in term of the dominance or the subordination of one's culture, gender, language, and so on), and material (in term of one's level of education, family status, political affiliation and so on). It is clear that my engagement in the North might offer political 'insider within' resources that can either privilege or disadvantage my identities. In the South as well, my 'within-ness' (either as an insider or outsider) could provide some 'upper hand' resources that either elevate or lessen my subjectivities within one's nation bound community. Funnily enough, in most of my field study, I had an easier time while in the Southern part of Nigeria (in Lagos). Before approaching the field, I felt I had developed the necessary competence (knowing someone to refer me to a person of authority, knowing how to get ethical approval on time, and knowing how to leverage on the 'know-how' in approaching and recruiting participants). The driver that was sent to pick me from the Airport by my accommodation provider in Lagos happened to be a distance learner in the selected University. In Lagos heavy traffic, Mr Jamiu inquired about my work and what I wanted to achieve during my stay in Lagos. Leveraging on his competence of the nitty-gritty of attending to 'know' the where and the how of the University, approval was granted the next day, and participant recruitment and data collection started immediately.

In developing the needed competence of recruiting participants, I become more aware of how my 'insider/outsider within' position might be a disadvantage. It is commonly known that there is a deeply rooted historic and political hostility between Northerners (under the politically homogenised Hausa-Fulani) and Southerners (the Yoruba's and the Igbo's in the South). Although we have co-existed and co-habited, I was sceptical of how my outsidership (I do not speak the Yoruba language, I dress differently and other subtle distinctions), and our different level of competence might impact on interaction with co-researchers. The issue generally is

in how some of the identifier constructs can trigger the blanketed tribalism that exists in member's setting, be it in the North or the South. In the North that I identify with, being a PhD student at a university in the United Kingdom might signify an advantageous standpoint. The underlying and common assumption would be that I am the son of a member of the elite class (which is not the case), resourceful and privileged, getting the needed education to maintain the family lineage of elitism. Or rather being perceived as an exemplar of what the Nigerian political landscape portrays – train them to memorise their pledge to the powerful or charge them to stand-up in the face of intimidation and manipulation for/from the powerful. The negative consequence of such an assumption might be that I could be placed within the exterior of a belonging interior, portraying a sense of otherness within one's associative community. Such a stereotype might be of disadvantage to me, regardless of my adequacy or competence in the field.

In both the universities and technology companies examined, my identity position is shifting, not as a pre-determined construct but one that is evolving as one dwell across existing boundaries. Where does all of this in-between across cultures and contexts leave us? Where does it take us in articulating the crisis of African-ness identity? One way to examine the relational aspect between belonging and otherness in identity politics would be historical and socio-cultural. Being placed and displaced within multiple framings of African-ness identities, I thought about reflecting on my ancestral identity and heritage as a way of explicating the complexities and temporalities of identity politics in reflexive cultures. This is particularly important as it would provide some clarity to how othered meaning of nation bound identity can take different forms and shapes in the political analysis of identity.

I learnt that my ancestors were from the Northeast part of Africa in the ancient Nubian kingdom of Kush – now Northern Sudan. My people were Islamic scholars who travelled across Western Africa in search of Islamic knowledge and commercial opportunities. The Sudanese (implying 'the black one's') are widely considered as the peoples that brought about a full description of 'blackness' in sub-Saharan Africa through their interactivity with the Arabs and the peoples of the Songhai/Mali empires (spanning from present-day Nigeria to Mali). In particular, Mazrui argues that the Arab's 'Sudanization' (make black explicitly) and European's 'alterity' (make inferior implicitly) of most part of sub-Saharan Africa made the 'black consciousness' integral to the constitution of one's identity [27]. In a way, the 'Sudanized' identity brought about a deeper coherence between Islam and Blackness, which I am a product of. Through our oral histories, we learnt that our people heard of the Jihad of Shaikh Usman ibn Fodio (the founder of the Sokoto caliphate in Northern part of Nigeria) and travelled to seek knowledge and offer their support for his Islamic Jihad (Holy wars). After Fodio's victorious wars in conquering what stands as northern Nigeria, our people decided to go back home (Sudan) but stopped around the ancient city of Kano to pay homage to their fellow countrymen/women that reside in the district of 'Sudawa' (meaning the community of the Sudanese). During the colonial regime, railway track reached the city of Nguru. Nguru is predominantly dominated by the Kanuri-Manga ethnic tribes. The natives consider the Hausa/Fulani to be expatriate, mostly drawn by commerce, whereas the native Hausa's in Kano considered the Fulani's and Sudanese

alike as mere herdsmen and passer-byers. Therefore, people coming from Kano to Nguru are largely considered ‘outsiders’ and vice versa. In my maternal grandfather’s merchantry and educational expeditions in the late 1930s, he travelled back and forth Nguru-Kano and finally settled at Hausari ward (meaning the community of the Hausa’s). He continued his scholarly expedition (with the establishment of the first all-female higher Islamic college in Nguru) while venturing in different businesses. I was born there, and it became ‘Home’.

This historical narrative is important as it shows the complexity and performativity of the crisis of socio-cultural identities. This might suggest the meaning of the hyphenation of the African-ness identities, and the complex network of issues raised and reproduced while attempting to confront and displace them in postcolonial and indigenous research. The narrative was not provided as a means of engaging in politicizing historical and cultural conditions but to chart out a possible futuring of the politics of identity in HCI4D, and as applied to African HCI. It was meant to show how the performance of different identifiers and constructs provide resources that can either elevate or devalue the relationship that ought to bond co-researchers in the practice of knowledge. Failure to adequately articulate how identity is culturally-socially constructed and reproduced as we relate with others might lead to fatal errors in the production of relational and situated knowledge. These matters to how we analyse a range of perspectives as it brings attention to the possibilities of developing alternative ways of being with/for other’s in one’s thinking, presentation and representation in community-driven research.

## 5 EPISTEMIC POSITIONALITY AND CULTURAL ADEQUACY

Interdisciplinarity and positionality are two inseparable issues that can affect the practice of investigating and understanding the multiplicity of the social world. In anthropological traditions, positionality is linked to where actor’s stand within the social world they occupy. This can be either a professional or personal role, which emphasises how a set of normative attributes and relations play out in the process/activities of understanding (or misunderstanding) other people (their traditions, cultures, values, language and so on). Winch [43] points our attention to the (im)possibilities of understanding ourselves and others. This is in relation to the conception (or misconception) of our self-understanding through one’s imaginaries, mental model, and language rules of knowing how to know and act in a particular context. Ultimately, such issues have led to the consideration of how reflexive thinking and documenting one’s epistemic positionality (and possible biases) might provide political resources to adequately account for the relationships that take place as one enters and exits a social setting. This consideration of positionality draws on earlier debates on ‘reflexivity’ in social research (see [26, 39]) as well as current considerations of ‘intersectionality’ in HCI (see. [38, 44]). In HCI, intersectionality has shown how identity and positionality (either theoretical, professional or personal) effect and impact the practice of understanding people and their plural culture for the purpose of design.

How then does my epistemic positionality, either by the association to disciplinary identifiers or personal construct, shape and

impact the multi-cultural and cross-disciplinary fieldwork undertaken? How does my in-betweenness positionality as a Nigerian impact the fieldwork? Does being reflexive and relational (in thinking and writing) makes the underlying power relation in research more visible? How would my positionality and that of the people that I interacted with be translated and contextualise in reporting? How would one’s methodological positionality play out in the analysis of ‘unique adequacy requirements’ and the development of ‘vulgar competences’? [16]. These are important questions that could bring attention to how identity and positionality shape the geopolitics of knowledge in transnational spaces. It could also highlight attributes that would make clearer the implication of problematising identity, positionality and adequacy in postcolonial methodologies, primarily because what stands as ‘postcolonial’ is not post- in any strong sense, but the next neo-colonial practices, which needed to be interrogated and decolonised.

In writing about my field experiences, it was clear to me how doing so would translate into something of methodological significant. While writing the methodology section of my thesis, I began to consider how my position in the field might determine (or undermine) the relationship between myself and co-researchers. The reading of ethnomethodology’s sensitization concepts of committing to member’s method/setting and not in any prior theory provided resources for developing relational knowledge about the field. This made me think extensively about how reflexivity, positionality and unique adequacy would play out in doing HCI4D research in diverse African communities.

Reflecting on my experience in the field, it appears to me that the hyphenation of an Africa-ness identity might suggest how different nodes connect/interact in the network of situated identity constitution and construction. It appears that non-indigenous peoples are starting to engage with the complexities of their identity in post-colonial engagement [7], presuming that it could make clear the changing mobilities of cultural identification. It is through the continual performativity of identity constructs that alternative spaces for re(assessing) and re(searching) one’s held account of identities can be interrogated and regenerated (as used in a Foucauldian framing of heterotopia as an alternate space for ordering). Supposedly, the heterotopic third space is one that mirrors, and upsets nation bound identities, speculatively transforming the understanding of belonging and otherness. Regardless of the possibilities of operating in alternate spaces, there is the question of the sort of relationships we might create through transnational engagement as HCI researchers? How would our situated ‘locale’ scholarship mirror or upset the underlying cultural assumptions about ‘Otherness’ in our theoretical and conceptual productions? These are questions that the community can reflect on as we converse about the inclusiveness and empowerment of diverse experiences in design futuring.

The main point I am trying make here is about the instrumentality and performativity of positionality and adequacy in the practice of producing social/racial contracts that can either transform or disguise the black marketing of knowledge in Africa. This is an issue that I take seriously in my research, and which I call upon the community to take seriously as well. The issue of positionality and adequacy in the situatedness of knowledge is not only about how diverse perspectives are presented and represented, but how power

is distributed across different levels of knowledge. It is an insistence that we should be mindful of the power relations embedded in the practices of knowledge and strive towards negotiating the intent, commitment and consequences of the labours of producing knowledge in Africa.

## 6 DISCUSSION OF FIELD SENSITIVES

In his book ‘Research is Ceremony’, Wilson suggests that “research is about unanswered question, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers. . . which brings to question some of the beliefs about the way research needs to be conducted and presented. . . and recognises the importance of developing alternative ways of answering question” [42, p.6]. In identifying some of the implications of integrating conventional (Western) and indigenous approaches to undertaking HCI4D research, the discussion points to the practicality of certain methodological practices in my PhD research. The approaches considered and the practical insights that came out of their application is meant to relatively unpack stereotypical practices of undertaking interdisciplinary research in Africa. This a heavy burden I must admit. What is hoped to demonstrate is the subtle differences in the ways we investigate Western and non-Western context, in term of research framing and design; ethical practices; methods of data collection, evaluation and validation; and the process of developing indigenous knowledge through the research processes. The sensitivities practised have provided a better understanding of how unchallenged assumptions get absorbed and transported in research, to the difficulties that might bring to the practice of home comer researcher’s, and the sort of handy sensitivities available as one seeks to develop the needed adequacy and competence across disciplines and institutions.

### 6.1 Practical Ethics

Ethics in research is a very thorny and slippery moral issue that reflect the assumptions and values of co-researchers. With the link between Western imperialism and its culture of misrepresenting other’s in research, the term research is widely considered as one of the ‘dirtiest words in indigenous world vocabulary’ [40]. This has led to the problematisation of how Western thought style, doctrines, and specifically ethics are applicable to non-western context, or somewhat a question of the implication of ‘ethical imperialism’ [20]. Under the canon of ethical imperialism, the primacy of the individual and the universality of specific cultures take precedence in its philosophical and theoretical formation over the collective and the pluriversal. This, therefore, points to the (ir)relevance and (im)practicality of Western ethical principles and practices in investigating and reporting African realities in different social context, and specific to HCI sensitivity practices.

In HCI, Howard and Irani [19] have shown a different dimension of the politics of ethics when research subjects care about the way in which their labour is presented and represented in knowledge. This places a dilemma on HCI methods of framing research ethics, either transnationally or translocally. Often, ethics is viewed as a reflection of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of what takes places in a research setting, the principles that shape the interactivity between co-researchers, and not on the practising issues of their interactivity [35]. It appears that the focus on the principles of interactivity does not manifest

participants interest and concerns but rather focuses on guiding the actions and decisions of the research. This points to how practical ethics ought to be contextualised as one works with indigenous communities. An awareness of how the practice of ethics plays out in local setting might suggest how it is imported, practised, and exported in interdisciplinary research. How responsible and accountable can one be to these relationships? How could/should the relationship shape the evolution of practical ethics and what it entails? These are some of the questions I asked myself after my field study. Before entering the field, however, I performed the usual bureaucratic practice of ethics in both my host institution in the UK and the host institutions/companies in Nigeria. Furthermore, before entering the field, the reflection was mainly focused on thinking about potential ethical dilemma beforehand, positioning oneself in the dilemma, and analysing and devising ways to react-respond to them. The thinking was considered a way of explicating one’s ethics and articulating what it entails in everyday practice. Due to the understanding of the subtle political and social structures of the Nigerian context, the competence developed is that of knowing how to approach the practice of ethics in the member’s setting. The ethics practised was first sorting ‘community consent’ from those in authority, showing an acknowledgement and an appreciation of the social structures in member’s setting. It was after gaining communal approval that I engaged in the usual informed consent from potential participants.

In the field, I had experiences that might have suggested a clear differentiation between the imagination of ethics and the practice of ethics in the member’s situated context. I was aware and cautious of how the gender and religious norms of co-researchers might shape and affect my practice with diverse member’s – somewhat working at the intersection of being impartial enough and being attentive to the sensitivities of gender and religion in Nigerian cultures. This was motivated by an encounter with an ethical dilemma when attempting to recruit a female participant. Students were rounding up a practical session in their computer lab when their lecturer made the announcement that I was there to talk to interested student about a project that seeks to understand the use of eLearning systems as part of their blended learning processes and activities. The particular student seemed interested in participating, but on hearing focus group discussion, she exhibited a deep sense of reservation (shy and wanting to avoid any interaction). In attending to the ethical issues at hand (sensitivity of gender while talking in a group), I immediately intervened by suggesting that we could do a talking circle instead – narrating what it is and its relation to the way indigenous people circle around a fireplace to listen to stories and oral histories, and also how our maternal parent have dinner with collectives of peers or the entire family (referred to as ‘Chiyayya’ in the Hausa language).

The practice of narrating and listening to stories in a circle is to develop the needed relationality between peers, whereas having dinner as a collective is to appreciate the multiples of perspectives. The ‘Chiyayya’ is a common practice in Northern Nigeria, which might denote a democratic way of given equal chance for individuals to present their meal, thereby having a feel of one’s agency with and by the collective. In talking circle, power is given to all participants (knowing how gender is performed in marginalising

certain voices), to speak and be heard, to learn from the experiences of other as a way of reorienting their perspective with the collective. Tapping on the practical knowledge of storytelling in circles and 'Chiyayya', the particular participant and other's that eavesdropped our conversation become more open and comfortable to participate in the discussion. This might suggest how important attending to and developing member methods is in indigenous research methodologies.

However, the practicality of ethics is not only about indigenising conventions but of devising new ways of interrogating or extending them. In an attempt to depart from convention, there was the consideration of the misconception of confidentiality and anonymity in indigenous research. The emphasis was on how the credibility and credit associated with knowledge can be negotiated primarily because most indigenous communities might require knowing where the perspective that represents them come from; how it plays out within their situated experiences and social context; and how it might be made more accountable/accommodative to other less obvious voices. When there is a negative consequence to such disclosure, one is faced with a dilemma that is to be analysed and responded to in relation to the collective. This means that ethics is evolving and temporal, pointing to the need for examining the potential negative consequence that might be associated with the codification of identification attribute in knowledge, either as an aspect of marginal empowerment or profound disempowering.

As HCI researchers, we work with the ethical frames accorded in the field, which are unfortunately Eurocentric. With the importance of local ethical framing in indigenous research, there is the possibility of meaningful dialogues and reciprocity in the transnational space of ethical reframing. From the sensitivities practised in the field, the complexities of ethics become more apparent in my work, which I could either embrace and extend or interrogate and recreate. Although I have made considerable effort in reacting to the demand's places by the disciplines of study and the research context, it becomes obvious that I might inevitably respond to some over others. This suggests that the practice of ethics, not philosophically or theoretically, ought to be situated in the context of its material and political use.

## 6.2 Reciprocal Engagement and Presentation

It is evident that the method adopted in research shapes the level of engagement that can take place among co-researchers. As indicated in the previous subsection, practical ethics espouse understanding the relationship, interactivity, and immersion between the research and research participants [12]. With an emphasis on the relationship that is created between co-researchers, how would co-researchers commit to the project and its consequences distributed among co-researchers? As I am neither after theory development nor committed to a prior theoretical formation, I immersed myself in the field with little or no expectation as to what to find, but to observe, listen and provoke responses from actors as to apprehend something interesting and important in the organisation of their work. I had a set of discussion pointer and some few questions that fed back to the research question initially formulated. With the temporal nature of the field, the engagement with participants was a constantly changing interaction – mirroring, retracting, distantly

gazing, and returning when deemed appropriate. There was also the consideration of how one's positionality (gender, religions, social status, and power) might shape the interactivity with participants in the field. I developed adequate competence in knowing that the issue of gender and social status can determine or undermine the level of engagement in the field. Sensitivities practice includes being courteous, respectful, and modest.

Another aspect of reciprocity practised was the discussion with experienced researchers in the UK (those that have worked across different context and Africa in particular) on the selection of methods before and after the initial fieldwork. There were also discussions with experienced researcher's working in the area of education research in Nigeria, with particular focus on identifying the subtle difference (if they do exist) in my thinking and their experiences over the years. It appears that the researcher's I spoke to were Western-trained (mostly in the UK), which might suggest a higher tendency to prefer the usual suspects (questionnaire, interview, focus groups, ethnography, contextual inquiry) than indigenous one's. However, the general commentary from their collective experiences was of identifying where one might need to depart from conventional and when they can be made more relevant to the social context of the investigation. The dialogical engagement is one that suggests that co-researchers are constantly partnering in assessing the appropriateness and reproduction of the usual suspects.

With the awareness of how selective ethnographic account can be, the practice of developing member meanings from the interpretive stories developed was considered as a way of sharing the power and labour in the presentation of knowledge. The summative evaluations conducted with students, lecturers and software developers/designers was also considered as a way of showing that one is committed to adequately represent member's account in their collective voices. These are typical example of what being reciprocal in one's engagement and being informative in the presentation of diverse perspective might entail, and as reported in HCI literature [9, 13]. Equally relevant to the practice of reciprocity in representation is the issues of generalization of empirical findings from specific context to the broader context in most indigenous communities. Thinking along with the rhetorical construct of [11], the issue mainly is about the kind of generalisation one makes (in term of purpose, scope, scale, rationale, and typicality), and the immersion of the researcher in attending to the social ordering of member's setting. The emphasis is on how the adequate reporting of members account can provide some basis for relationally organising and representing the multiplicity and temporality of the social world. The concern for accountable and relational ways of presenting and representing research finding is more than an ethical requirement, but a political necessity that determines how indigenous thoughts and knowledge are produced and extended.

## 6.3 Problematization of Reflexivity

The methodological debate about reflexivity, not only in the social sciences is one that is already complicated and likely to continue as such. Simply, reflexivity is the practice of critical self-appraisal of actor and how their values, assumptions, powers and biases shape the process and practice of the research. The reflexive first-person account often examines how the positionality of co-researchers affect/effect the processes and activities of knowledge production. For

example, Slack stressed that researcher’s reflexivity is problematic as it “has missed the need to ground their claims in the lifeworld of society members, thus promoting the very ironic stake they seek to address” [39, p.1]. May, on the other hand, see reflexivity as a thorny concept that would continue to divide the spectrum of reflexive practice and argue instead for an examination of researchers’ positionalities (and potential biases) to the practices of empirical research [26]. This shows how problematic the practice of reflexivity is in empirical analysis, be it radical, referential, endogenous, essential or stipulative.

Drawing on intersectional HCI, one can begin to imagine how accounting for the positionalities of the collective can bring about more relation approach to reflexive culture [44]. The practice is that of articulating and stating the assumption that might affect the research, as strongly and as clearly as possible. There is no place for assuming neutrally, as neutrality is a position on its own right. Some of the assumptions might include the constitution of reality (one’s worldview), the nature of knowledge (how one recognises and identify with it), and how one’s own held values influence the interpretation of multiple realities. Through reflexive notetaking of important events in the field and the recollection of how I conducted myself with field member’s, I come to apprehend the different between reflexivity of actors and reflexive account.

#### 6.4 Relational Accountability

The subtle differences between the classic concept of ‘reflexivity’ and ‘relational accountability’ are one’s that emphasises how power can be negotiated and shared between co-researchers. Such accountability is one that emphasizes the ‘grounding’ of co-researcher’s interactivity in the context of the field and not the other way around. This is not a normative practice of power relations in the field but acknowledging that one’s presence in the field exercised certain social powers, which necessitates one to be conscious of the possibilities of difference in their values and that of the host community member’s. It is in knowing how to apprehend the ontological and axiological culture of the context one seeks to investigate and report on that a dialogical premiss for articulating the changing mobilities of the social world can be established. This can be achieved by mapping out how to adequately (but not completely) see things from the ‘native’ point of view and deliberate the multiple meanings that can be attached to the social world.

In unpacking how institutional structure and social contracts determine the practices of knowledge production and dissemination in my PhD research, I begin to reassess and reorient Mr Jamiu’s (and other key agents that assisted in developing competence in the field) epistemic positionality in the knowledge produce and its relationship to the black market of knowledge. Thinking aloud, wouldn’t the rhetoric of ‘unintended consequence’ be relational to the black marketing of research assistance knowledge? [34]. Our initial relation might be considered as a ‘socio-economic’ contract but the instrumentality of his adequacy and competence to some part of the research might signify an unacknowledged ‘epistemic’ contract. Am I only to commit to our socio-economic contact or am I to account for the epistemic one’s?

The commitment to remunerates the trivial epistemic dues can be considered as a step further in being relationally accountable

to one’s engagement and interaction in the field. Not doing so might easily be categorised as blanketing and advancing the black marketing of different perspectives and experience in knowledge production and the knowledge produced. Relational accountability calls for making clear cut commitments to the same ontology, axiology and epistemologies of undertaking research. Authors [34] have provided an example of how relational accountability can be taken further in the politics of knowledge, making different actors voices visible for interpretation in the geopolitics of situated knowledge. The relationship between myself and Mr Jamiu, along with other participants (primarily those that were first of contact in the field) was continual to this day. We still exchange pleasantries via WhatsApp, take about our inspirations and happenings here and there, made casual conversations about the stage of the research, and the promises one inspires on its implication to both research and practice in Nigeria. This shows our collective commitment to decoding and deconstructing the situated practices in our communities, which might denote an attribute of doing social-good otherwise.

Alternatively, making a difference would be first attending to member’s understanding of the essence of modern technology in questioning how widely held assumptions often conceal how technicity ‘enframed’ human tendencies (in Heideggerian terms). Inspiring to bring about changes starts from within and works towards the collective. It is within the thread of multiple agendas and inspirations that we can come to adequately apprehend how ‘relationship’ plays a vital role in the contextualisation of what knowing and doing good and with care in research entails – in abstract and fuller sense [19]. It is through my relationship with field member’s that I have come to know (with an utter of certainty) how certain conventions are (ir)relevant and where indigenous ones might be made more appropriate and sustainable.

#### 7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I set out to provide a retrospective reflection on some of the political and material implications of adopting a ‘stand-point methodology’ to the practice of staging and undertaking fieldwork in Nigeria. It also sought to show the limiting relevance of well-known methods of understanding the social relations in most African communities, instead emphasising how indigenous sensitivities can allow an adequate and representative accounting of situated relations. With the fallacies associated with the doing social-good research with and for marginalised communities [33], and recent calls for an ethics of care in HCI [19], it becomes pertinent to examine how the intersection of identity, positionality and adequacy inform and shape the presentation and representation of different agents in situated and indigenous knowledge. The reflexive account of my experiences as a homework(er) undertaking research in Nigeria is not a critique of how conventional methods in social science and HCI do not attend to the underlying inspiration and subtleties of member’s, but one that considers the overreaching implication of an eclectic methodological positionality in HCI4D research practices. Taking an eclectic approach to sensitizing research problems, collecting data to better understanding those problems, and analysing results is considered as has marginally allowed negotiating and sharing power in the production and presentation of situated knowledge. As ethic is considered as a “system of agential relationship that cannot be assigned to unitary subject” [19,



p. 11], it is presumed that a standpoint methodological approach could make more visible the power relations between co-researcher (the researcher and the research participants), and also how those relations determine the social orders and contracts of research enterprise across different disciplines.

While exploring how the ethical practice of undertaking interdisciplinary field study might bring about alternative ways of knowing and doing education and design, it is obvious that 'social-good' can also mean 'cultural-bad'. Accountability without care is more dangerous than intent without commitment. Intention is the relation between idiosyncratic views and communal concerns whereas commitment is about reconciling the demands of the self and the public demand upon oneself. These are issues that are contested, situated and evolving as one interact and relate with others. Therefore, the burden of caring is considered an obligation and an intervention for staying with the troubles and dilemmas of the field, and not an evaluation criterion of how accountable and committed one is to themselves and others in a design project. Accounting for the nuances in the field might show how, as co-researcher, we sometimes work together and against each other in our effort towards negotiating and distributing diverse agencies, subjectivities, identities, and powers. As a matter of urgency, the African HCI community ought to engage the ethics of care in neglected issues like that of identity politics, epistemic positionality, cultural adequacy, and the black marketing of knowledge. Doing so would likely bring our collective attention to how the labour relations of different actors are presented and represented in knowledge production and the knowledge produced.

In conclusion, the reflection of my selective experiences in the field is meant to sensitize the community of what it takes for me to undertake two field studies in Nigeria. It also attempts to shed more light on whether it is ethical to study Africa with colonial-postcolonial tactic; and whether identity and positionality have any (or would have) effect on the ethics of caring for neglected voices and stories. Historically, with 'research' being considered a vulgar activity that was undertaken by self-proclaimed saviours burden with liberating and transforming primitive societies, doing HCI4D research under the premiss of doing 'social-good' could trigger unfavourable memories, believing instead that accounting for the 'relationships' created and extended as a result of our practice in the field might provide an outlook that shows that HCI researcher's care – that we are not here to do 'missionary work', but here to stay with the troubles of the collectives.

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