The Challenges of Implementing Action Research in a Divided Context: A Field Account

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Abstract

Action research is mainly concerned with the entrenchment of social change through social interventions that involves the beneficiaries as key participators. The study documents the experience of the researcher in conducting action themed research in two adversarial communities in North-Central Nigeria. The core goals of the study are to draw attention to the usefulness of this approach for peacebuilding research and to also shed light on some of the complexities associated with this kind of research. A research diary was employed to document events and reflections as they unfolded during the fieldwork. A combination of a harsh social climate and the invasive nature of the research functioned to deepen the conventional limitations associated with projects of this nature in the research settings. Challenges were encountered in the areas of access to information, researchers' identity, and emotive interaction with the process. Disruptive difficulties were also experienced during the intervention stage of the research where emerging developments in the social-political climate in both communities had drastic effects on the research. The navigation of these challenges was facilitated by a step-by-step application of simple methodological and practical principles that facilitated data collection without compromising the scientific rigour of the study. The primacy placed on values such as sensitivity, resilience, genuine commitment for the welfare of the communities was also instrumental for actualising the research goals. The study recommends the inclusion of non-formal techniques such as observation and informal conversations in data collection processes in conflict communities. To optimise productivity, change oriented researchers may benefit from a preliminary assessment of the potential methodological and practical difficulties inherent in the research context.

Keywords

action research, conflict communities, peacebuilding, social change, methodological challenges, participation, identity

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Introduction

The act of conducting research in a context of violence is underpinned with a number of methodological and personal challenges. Most times, these factors are rarely addressed by the mainstream literature on research processes (Browne, 2013; Ngwenya, 2017). Some of the common areas of concerns revolve around securing access to information and the personal safety of the researchers. The nature and extent of these limitations are usually mediated by the context and the nature of the study. For less popular research designs that entail more invasive inquiry processes, these challenges assume a different dimension.

Action research presents a method of knowledge creation that requires an immersion of the research processes into the context for the purpose of social change. Knowledge advancement and social change are actualised through iterative processes that enable participants and researchers develop practical theories about a phenomenon. Engaging beneficiaries with change processes facilitates a transformation of their perceptions/disposition towards social issues and the ability to make contributions towards their economic, political, and psychological advancements. In communities affected by negative vices such as violence, this could translate into an increased proclivity for engaging in reconciliatory or peace supporting activities between opposing groups.

The implementation of action research in societies affected by violence could be marred by irregularities thereby increasing their propensity or capability to further degenerate the social climate. In divided communities, issues such as securing access to information and the safety of researchers are more complicated because of underlying animosities and the likelihood of a resurgence of violence. The ability to respond appropriately to these and other challenges without compromising the scientific rigour of the study is largely dependent on the researchers' sensitivity to emerging nuances and flexibility with the inquiry tools and process.

Recent studies have emphasized or alluded to the importance or essentiality of the researchers' capabilities in overcoming or navigating the multi-variant limitations that emerge during the research processes especially in the field of qualitative inquiry (Mukeredzi, 2012; Othman & Hamid, 2018; Roman, 2016; Tshabangu, 2009). This makes apparent the value of researchers experiences in understanding the practicalities of social inquiry.

The challenges associated with conducting research in divided societies constitute the core focus of this study; the primary goal is to draw attention to the intricacies of less popular designs of inquiry like action research. It draws from the field experience of the author in two adversarial communities to discuss the methodological, practical, and personal challenges encountered during the research process. Notable among these limitations are difficulties in securing access to women and youths, identity complications, emotional factors, withdrawal from the research process. The nature of these challenges was accentuated by the prevailing social climate in both communities which was characterised by disconnection (unofficial break in communication) and underlying tensions over possible outbreak of violence. Executing a social inquiry with an action component driven towards promoting values of peacebuilding such as interaction, nonviolence and trust between both communities was faced with limitations which transcended the traditional limitations associated with social inquiry in such unconventional contexts.

The study discusses how the aforementioned challenges were navigated to secure required access for the implementation of a social change programme. The study details literature on the complexities of conducting research in communities affected by conflict and offers practical guidelines for future practices/endeavours through the authors experience on the field. By discussing these issues, the study hopes to draw attention to the potentials of social research in divided societies with active conflict features.

The article is divided into five parts, the first provides an overview of the concept of action research, the second a review of scholarly works on researching in violent context, the third section introduces the research methods, the fourth section discusses the researcher's experience and conclusion makes up the last section.

Action Research: A Conceptual Overview

Grounded in a philosophy of social action, action research emphasizes a participatory process of knowledge which features a combination of theory development, social action and change (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Kagan et al., 2008. Bradbury (2015) describes action research

as an integrated pragmatic worldview where theory and practice are linked. Practice informs the value of theory, and the emergent value shapes the quality of action research. Reason and Bradbury in Kagan et al. (p. 32) offers an explicit description of action research:

> Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worth-while human purpose, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging as this historical moment it seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory, and practice, in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

Simply defined, action research represents an approach to conducting research that fulfils the requirements of rigorous scientific inquiry and also advances democratic social change. More specifically, action research can be viewed as a philosophy or orientation towards knowledge creation which privileges knowledge emergent from practice informed inquiry entrenched in the context of the social problem (Bradbury, 2015).

The origin of action research is traceable to the works of Kurt Lewin (Thoillent, 2011) who emphasized the primacy of research with social action over research confined to the production of books. Implicit in the definitions of action research are its core values which essentially includes democracy, participation, action, and collaboration. Knowledge creation is driven towards collaboratively devising solutions for identified social problems. It applies the principles of democracy and participation into knowledge creation and taps from diverse experiences with the researcher and participants working as partners throughout the process (Vickers, 2007).

Action research enables participants to influence desired changes through iterative cycles of actions which essentially centres around, planning, action and evaluation. There exist a close link between these actions as developments in each stage is informed by observations from a preceding one thus lending credence to the description of action research as consisting of spiral or fluid phases of activities (Burns, 2015).

The researcher and the participants jointly engage in identifying and investigating a problem, devising a plan of action to address the problem, application of proposed actions and evaluation of the action. The insights obtained from the evaluation will be instrumental for improving knowledge on the social action and could stimulate further implementation and inquiry process thus reflecting the continuous nature of action research.

Rodriguez (2015) describes action research as open-ended and transformational where the knowledge accumulated in each cycle provides a basis for the inception of a new set of inquiry. Each stage is characterised by reflective processes that helps advance theoretical development and appropriateness of social action (Dick, 2007; Rodriguez). These reflections have positive implications on improving the knowledge of the researcher and the participants. Action research is a continuous process characterised by periodic data collection and the implementation of necessary changes to the social action.

Action research provides a means for tapping into a robust social resource essential for societal transformation. This resource is inherent in diverse experiences, cultures, interest, and capabilities. By upholding the tenets of democracy, societal capability for exploring and mobilising, internal resources for constructive purposes are strengthened (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Action research contributes in equipping individuals with knowledge for self-liberation, it facilitates the challenge of dominant and sometimes unproductive social practices. Thus justifying reference to it as an emancipatory and political approach to research (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). It is currently being advocated as a viable approach for developing theory and

advancing change in communities affected by various forms of violence (Kaye, 2017; Kayser, 2015; Spence & Makuwira, 2005). The importance of this shift is accentuated by the growing need to make interventions more responsive to the needs of the beneficiaries and to improve the capabilities of stakeholders to engage with complex societal issues and facilitate the transformation of their societies into more desirable entities.

Researching Violence: Common Issues

The task of conducting research in societies affected by any form of violence is accompanied with peculiarities that have potentials of ameliorating or fuelling the prevailing tensions in the contexts of study (Tshabangu, 2009). Hence researchers working in such contexts are charged with extra responsibility of ensuring that their activities are conducted in ways that do not bring any form of jeopardy or discomfort to the host communities. This heightens the need to pay more attention to the preparedness of researchers for such endeavours. This becomes vital in view of the sparse information available on the topic (Browne, 2013; Cohen & Arieli, 2011), a condition that is partly responsible for dissuading researchers from studying in such contexts.

Access to information and the researcher's interaction with the context constitute the common areas of challenges for research in societies affected by conflict. (Bowd & Alpaslan, 2010; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Hume, 2007). Typically, inhabitants of conflict societies or victims of violence are reluctant to engage with researchers, this reluctance is driven by doubts about the intent/identity of the researcher as well as the need to protect themselves from adverse implication of information disclosure, Cohen and Arieli (p. 425) points to the existence of a general tendency for all individuals including those that have not been affected by the conflict to develop high suspicions about outsiders. Thus, making it difficult to establish the required trust for enquiry.

Research in communities affected by violence may also be hampered by the researcher's reactions and interactions with the context and data collection process. Whilst investigating the interpretations given to violence through a life history approach, Hume (2007) revealed the complexities associated with researchers' emotional interactions with the nuances emerging from respondents' accounts of violence and its implications on assigning meanings to subjective experiences. Added to this, is the traumatic effect testimonials of violence has on the researcher. Browne (2013) alludes to the personal and practical difficulties inherent in qualitative data collection in a densely secured area such as West Bank.

These challenges include the logistic complexities of navigating dense security arrangements in a divided society and personal risks to life emanating from incidents of sporadic violent acts like bomb explosion. Aside from overt violence, the political climate can also influence the dynamics of research. For instance, an authoritarian political climate where freedom of expression is restricted will not only serve to deter the respondents' cooperation but will also affect the researchers' zeal or commitment for eliciting factual information. The effects of such climate on the underrepresentation of marginalised populations in conflict research has been recognised (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

From the foregoing discussion, it can be inferred that the challenges associated with undertaking research in unstable societies are mediated by factors such as prevailing socio-political climate and the nature of the research. Thus, necessitating the need for widespread knowledge on the manifestations of these challenges especially with less explored forms of inquiry such as action research. As noted earlier, action research practices demand higher involvement from the respondents; in contexts characterised by social irregularities this translates into magnifying the traditional challenges with the emergence of additional obstacles which could truncate the research process. The article offers practical insights into these

complexities through the author's experience of implementing an action research project in two polarised communities in North-Central Nigeria. It discusses how the issues of access and trust unfolded and how these and other challenges were navigated to secure higher levels of participation required for social change.

Research Outline and Context

The study is informed by the researcher's experience during her field research for her doctoral thesis. Based on an action research design, the thesis explored the social climate in Share and Tsaragi with the central objective of implementing an intervention to initiate constructive attitudinal changes in members of both communities. Share and Tsaragi are two neighbouring communities of separate ethnic extractions located in Kwara State, North Central Nigeria. Both towns have been engulfed in a series of violent confrontations rooted in competing claims over the ownership of land. The intermittent escalation of violence between both sides over the years have led to the loss of lives and destruction of properties.

It has also had adverse implications on the social fabric between both communities evident through the degradation of social interaction between members of both sides. The researcher's motive for the project was primarily driven by the recurring incidents of violent confrontations between both towns (the latest was in 2016) and the accompanying need for a sustainable resolution of the conflict. When the fieldwork was conducted, there was a very evident disconnection between members of both sides as there were social bans which prevented fraternization between members of both communities. The social climate in the area was characterised with vestiges of conflict evidenced through the existence of widespread feelings of mistrust, hatred, and suspicion on both sides. It is against this backdrop of disconnection between both sides, the study aimed at promoting social change in both communities through separate and joint interactive sessions with selected participants. The interactive sessions were designed to boost innate capacities for peacebuilding and also promote inter-communal interactions.

Methodology

Qualitative tools of data collection such as interview, focus group discussion and participant observation were employed to collect data in both communities. Qualitative tools have been noted as beneficial for acquiring deeper insights into subjective experiences, this made them suitable for attaining the core objectives of the primary study. The objective revolved around accessing/understanding the experiences of the conflict and attempting to transform same. The fieldwork was undertaken between March 2017 and March 2018. The researcher is a female Nigerian studying for a degree in a South African University and has no previous working or visiting experience in either of the communities.

Semi-structured interview format was purposely deployed to gather information because of its flexible nature which is beneficial for accessing comprehensive knowledge on pronounced drivers and perceptual factors underpinning the conflict. The focused group discussions were interactive in form with the researcher taking the place of a facilitator that introduced talking points and moderated interactions to clarify crucial points and ensure inclusive participation. The content of the interview and FGD guides were developed using insights acquired from relevant studies on intergroup conflict resolution (Aggestam, 2014; Bar-Tal, 2000; Ramsbotham et al., 2011).

Research Diary

The research diary is a tool utilised by researchers to record their experiences of the research process, it includes all the planned and unplanned reactions that were stimulated during the course of the research. It is commonly done in a written format and mostly serves as a complement to other forms of data collection procedure especially qualitative types. It enables the documentation of steps and crucial decisions that occurred during data collection and the researchers' thoughts about these. This includes; the persons interviewed, date and venues of interviews, challenges encountered and methodological decisions undertaken to facilitate data collection (Browne, 2013). Thus, diaries are useful tools for stimulating reflections and promoting learning about topical issues, it enables critical reflections on how the researcher's opinions interact with the research process (Bloor & Wood, 2006). It has been described as a scaffolding instrument that details the researchers' awareness on the process of knowledge production (Engin, 2011).

Research diaries help researchers track the transformations taking place in their conceptions of the study and the transformation taking place with regards to the direction or objectives of the study thereby enabling the emergence of a coherent interpretation of the entire study (Browne, 2013). This contributes in providing an accurate description of the research process which usually depart from the popular linear and simple depiction. In the context of this study, a research diary was employed as a repository of information to document the actions that unfolded during the fieldwork and the researcher's reflections on emerging nuances from the context of study as well as the inquiry process. It was a handy booklet which was always in the possession of the researcher and as such served as the first point for scribbling reflections, observations, feelings, and impressions. Information on the unfolding research process was documented on separate pages whilst emotions and personal perceptions on occurrences were documented separately with dates and clear subject descriptions. These notes informed crucial decisions which enabled the inquiry process to be responsive to emerging developments in an unstable context. It also served as a meditational space where the researcher articulated all the nuances (both affective and cognitive) as they emerged during the implementation of the research plan.

Challenges Encountered During the Exploratory Phase

An exploration of the social climate in both communities is fundamental for acquiring detailed knowledge on the state of affairs in the context of study hence the fieldwork commenced with an exploratory phase. This primarily involved exploring the opinions and perceptions of community members in both communities about the conflict and their attitudes towards the neighbouring community. Interviews, observation, and focused group discussions were the major instruments for data collection at the stage, the challenges that were encountered during this phase are discussed below.

Access to Information

My entrance into both communities was met with reluctance and scepticism, this was primarily because of the prevailing social climate in both communities as both sides were still reeling from the last incident of violence which occurred less than a year before my arrival in the community. This was further complicated by a stagnant resolution process and allegations of government's favouritism towards a side in the conflict. The tensions between members of both communities visibly evidenced through widespread feelings of suspicions and distrust in both communities made the process of securing access to information in both communities a

tedious task. Community members were generally reluctant about engaging on such a sensitive topic with a "stranger." As pointed earlier, such hesitation is common with societies that have experienced some form of violence. Other authors have documented similar responses at the onset stages of their action research project (Christopher et al., 2008; de Toledo & Giatti, 2014). de Toledo and Giatti make reference to initial resistance aggravated caused by the participants' concerns on the benefits of the project to their community.

In the study context some of the factors underpinning the reluctance to engage with researchers includes the lack of trust and the closed-circuit nature of the communities which discourages discussions on sensitive issues without appropriate authorisation. To navigate this barricade, community leaders specifically chiefs and executives of youth associations were approached for permission, a procedure described by Asiedu (2010) as the door knocking process. Consequently, my interviews started with influential members of the communities such as the chiefs and executives of notable associations in both communities.

However, whilst it was relatively easier to secure the participation of notable members of the communities such as chiefs, executives of youth association, clerics, it was more challenging to gain access to everyday interpretations of the conflict through ordinary members of both communities especially the experiences of youths and women. Two factors may be responsible for this obstruction, one is the cultural underpinnings of the community where women assume more silent roles whilst the second is the composition of post-conflict communities, which features victims and perpetrators of violence who may be unwilling to share their experiences because of pain and the fear of prosecution. This shows that securing official approval is not sufficient to gain access for information in conflict environments particularly in communities with visible signs of hostilities.

In this context, access to respondents was more dependent on crucial factors such as trust which is motivated by some sort of assurance or conviction about the intention of the researcher. In the second community, securing access to information was more challenging because of their sensitivities about the conflict, this may be understandably linked to the fact that this community suffered more physical damages during the last outbreak of inter-communal violence.

Employing a local resource person (recommended by the elites) and spending a lot of time in both communities were instrumental in securing access to individual participants particularly the youths who were very cautious about engaging with a research that could possibly indict them. At the inception of the inquiry process when I was relatively new to the community, the youths were elusive about their experiences as several of them feigned ignorance when they were asked about the conflict. However, as I spent more time in the communities building rapport with people, they generally became more receptive to me and the idea of the project. However, there was the challenge of collating undiversified information or mono-directional responses due to the utilisation of the recommended local resource persons. This is a crucial implication of employing snowballing technique in divided communities. To mitigate this, more than one local resource person was utilised to gain access to participants.

Securing access to female participants was particularly challenging due to the patriarchal structure of both communities, women were less inclined to participate as a result of a perceived sense of powerlessness resulting from having little knowledge on underlying dynamics of the conflict such as the resolution attempts and their outcomes. Some of the women that were approached referred me to those they perceived were more knowledgeable mainly their husbands or other men. I was eventually able to secure the participation of some women by providing assurance on the value of the respondents' experiences and knowledge on the matter and in some cases totally discarding my recording devices as I noticed that the presence of a recording device gave an overly formal tone to our discussions which made them

uncomfortable. In such cases, note-taking was the suitable documentation tool which helped to boost the confidence of respondents and also promote extensive interactions. A systematic approach of noting/highlighting crucial points during interactions for development after the interviews was adopted. This system helped foster the engaging condition required for productive interview sessions. It can thus be deduced that more factual information was more likely to be secured by utilising an informal mode of conversation. This was however a trend that was also noticed with some other participants. People disclosed more factual information during informal conversations than during formal interview sessions. This reiterates the primacy of incorporating data collection tools such as observation and informal discussions in conflict environments.

Researcher's' Identity Influences on Action Research Process

A number of observations have been made concerning the influence of researchers' background on the action research process, most notably in terms of the unintended effects their knowledge, status, gender can have on the attainment of the research goals of empowerment (Kagan et al., 2008; Rosenthal & Khalil, 2010; Smith et al., 2010). Power disparities in research groups have implications for undermining the creation of an environment suitable for the emergence/occurrence of participatory and empowering interactions.

In the context of this study, notable covert and salient reactions to my identity created invisible barricades to information collection. These reactions were made manifest in three ways which includes my identity as an expert/foreign researcher, my identity as a female researcher and my identity as an insider. As a Nigerian studying for a degree outside the country, I was perceived as an expert of some sort with rounded knowledge on conflict related issues.

These notions were implicit in the expressions of some respondents. Some of the expressions implied conscious attempts to level up with preconceived positions of power attributed to the researcher as a result of her educational status. Specifically, some youths mentioned that they were also in school studying, and they also know about project writing. Some repeatedly emphasized that they were uneducated during the interview sessions, despite the fact that discussion was sometimes done in their local language. As a female, working in traditional communities entrenched and visibly guided by patriarchal principles had silent implications on the way I received. Though reactions to my gender were not explicitly stated, they could be deduced from the expressions of respondents and their natural inclinations towards engaging with the male research assistant. It should however be noted that these nuances were most visible in the community with more traditional values and was more accentuated during the initial stages of the field work (exploratory stage).

Thirdly, ethnic identity emerged as an important factor during the fieldwork as there was profound expression of curiosity about my ethnic identity by respondents especially in the first community. Most times the first question I was asked by a respondent is "where are you from and why are you interested in our conflict." Being of the Yoruba ethnic extraction (my name instantly gave me out) meant I shared some similarities with one side, this further heightened curiosity about my intent and in extreme cases obstructed the trust building process required for recruitment or collation of factual data.

In other cases, inferences about the concerns on identity were detected from respondents' side comments about the mission of the researcher and also the body language of respondents, some of whom seemed unrelaxed at the inception of interviews. The implications of such identity affiliation on the extent to which researchers engage with factions in divided context have been recognised (Smyth, 2005, p. 18). A notable impact of identity affiliation is

evidenced through an innate proclivity to engage more with those he/she shares connection with.

On the other hand, in the second community, my identity was conceived along the lens of an outsider whose interpretation of their accounts could have negative implications on the image of their community. This was explicitly expressed by two notable members of Share community who narrated previous ordeals with researchers who misrepresented their stories. These researchers visited the community and were given factual information but choose to distort these accounts in the final report in order to corroborate the claims of the other community. This draws broader attention to the implication of researchers' representation of reality on the socio-political dynamics of communities involved.

Mitigating Researcher's Identity

To navigate these challenges, explicit information about my identity was relayed to curious respondents alongside emphasizing my position as a neutral patriot who is interested in the promotion of peace. To further promote receptiveness, conscious efforts was invested into immersing myself into the community's way of life particularly in the areas of dressing. I adorned myself in manners that were deemed acceptable for women within the community, this was especially important in the more traditional community. This entailed having my hair covered most times, and sometimes allowing the male field assistance to take the lead by handling the preliminary introduction of the project before I proceeded with further details.

This also contributed to breaching the gap created by gendered notions of power. This draws attention to the broader implications of cultural enlightenment for conducting research in indigenous communities which according to Reed (2012, p. 210) is instrumental for making vital decisions and also for ensuring the safety of those involved with the research. Conscious efforts were invested into ameliorating the gaps created by the status of being a researcher, this involved downplaying the strength of my professional ability and also maintaining a non-hierarchal style of interaction. Aside from conducting some interviews in the local languages, in situations where English was used, the language style was suited to facilitate easy and comfortable communication and deconstruct preconceived notions about researchers' perfection. This entailed initiating the interviews with most simple words and sometimes using informal versions of English like Pidgin English.

Mitigating Researcher's Bias

To defuse concerns about partisanship or bias resulting from my similarities with one of the communities, I started my investigation in Tsaragi community and not Share community, which I shared ethnic affiliations with. This helped ease my access to information in the first community as most of the respondents expressed curiosity about the opinion of their neighbouring communities and when they learn that I had not been to the other community, they displayed more receptiveness towards me. This also had added advantage for structuring my understanding and interpretation of the conflict as it helped limit influence of personal bias (resulting from ethnic ties) that may have arisen as a result of unconscious sentimental reactions on my part. In response to the concerns that arose with regards to the possible distortion facts and accounts, I find accentuating the participatory nature of the study useful as well as making a commitment to presenting a copy of the finalised project to the communities after completion. Additionally, in presenting the narratives from both communities, the emphasis will be focused on constructive transformation of the conflict, sensitive topics such as contradictory historical narratives will be downplayed.

Researcher's Anxieties Between Two Divided Communities

Working in two estranged communities visibly marked with signs of hostilities such as the presence of armed security operatives (military and police) and well publicised social prohibitions heightened anxieties about my safety as a female researcher with limited knowledge about the intricacies in both communities. Particularly disturbing were the risks attached to collating information from both sides as there was the possibility of being perceived as a spy or an informant by either side. There were also discouragements from seeming "concerned" community members, who recommended a possible change of the research setting due to the erratic nature of the social climate in both communities. This was more so because the fieldwork commenced during the raining season when controversies about landownership were more prevalent.

Feelings of anxiety were regularly reinforced by physical reminders of the immediate past and potential volatile future through the presence of multiple military/police checkpoints and the situation of security operatives at strategic parts of both communities. Motorist coming into the area were subjected to scrutiny by security operatives before and upon entrance into both communities. I recall vividly a scary experience of being harassed at the military checkpoint by an officer for browsing through my phone whilst the commercial vehicle I boarded was undergoing routine assessment. This particular experience increased my concerns on the dangers attached to working in both communities and for a while I was nervous whenever I passed through the security check point.

To diffuse erroneous notions of espionage and limit potential threats, I deliberately embarked on elaborate description of the goal and design of my project to all the respondents, I explicitly stated that the project was aimed at peace promotion and will involve frequent back and forth movements in both communities. Furthermore, visitation to each community during the exploratory stage was conducted in company of my research assistant and a resource person in the community.

However, as I became more familiar with both communities, feelings of anxiety dissipated. Important security cues were deciphered from ordinary conversations with members of the community including interactions with commuters whilst travelling to the field and also closely observing developments in both communities. Taking familiarisation trips to both communities was very key for obtaining factual information about the state of affairs between both communities. Articulating my thoughts in a research diary also provided some reprieve particularly with regards to mitigating the negative effects of emotions on the scientific rigour of the study. Thus confirming Browne (2013) description of research diaries as cathartic tools useful for constructively channelling the intense emotions precipitated by the research process. Documenting the feelings of fear, anxiety, and hope was instrumental for acquiring clearer and defined understanding of such feelings thereby reducing or isolating their illogical influence on the research process.

> I noticed today that the youth leader appeared indifferent to my initiative, and this is a direct opposite of what he expressed initially during my earlier visits where he was very optimistic and committed to rendering help to bring both sides together. He actually told him during those earlier visits not to be worried about how to bring both sides together, he was going to talk to his counterpart on the other end. However, things have now taken a different turn as he vehemently refused to talk to his counterpart on the other side. He said he can't poke his nose in another community's business. This development brings scary feelings about the future of this project and has further opened my eyes to the

unpredictable nature of conflict communities, but I will press on one step at a time (research diary, Ilorin, April 4, 2017).

Reflective processes have been described as beneficial for exposing shortcomings of researchers such as biases, misgivings and unintentionally patronising attitudes that underpin the charitable intentions of academics (Smith et al., 2010). In the study context, reflections were specifically useful for interrogating the influence of personal emotions, biases on the research process. A mitigation of the impact of such factors fosters the creation of an appropriate environment for the emergence of emancipatory relationships with beneficiaries.

Mitigation of Ethical Issues

Several respondents' particularly ordinary members (non-elites) of both communities were sceptical about divulging their names and signing consent forms. Some respondents appeared frightened at the sight of papers, making them reluctant about engaging with the research. This was in contrast to the disposition of prominent members of the communities who willingly gave written consent and permission to use their real names. To address this limitation, I had to downplay written or signed consent, more emphasis was placed on verbal consent. Interview guidelines especially those that pertain to audio documentation, traditional one on one interrogation was relaxed.

On few occasions, respondents were more motivated to speak as a team of two or three rather than one on one basis, a situation that may be traced to fear and lack of confidence. The lack of confidence in their knowledge of the society was explicitly displayed when a one-on-one interview with a female respondent was transformed into an interaction with two women. Both women linked their preference for this style to their gender which in their words meant they had limited knowledge or voice on community affairs. The interview however offered meaningful insights into everyday narratives of ordinary women in divided societies.

In the course of conducting interviews, there were requests from some community members to reveal the narratives from the other community, on one or two occasions such requests were presented as pre-requisite condition for participation. Request to divulge information was politely rejected on the basis of the principle of confidentiality and more efforts invested into recruiting other participants. Visible during the interviews were nuances that legitimised the use of violence and signalled complicity with criminal actions. These meanings were visible through assertive statements which not only acknowledge but justified the execution of violent actions against the other community. An example is "we thank God, he helped us burn their houses too."

Resultantly, there were momentary internal frictions between moral values and such expressive justification of violent actions. To navigate this and prevent it from interfering with the inquiry process, a somewhat detached position was taken which involved passively listening to accounts of violence, blocking reflections about the moralistic interpretation or implications of such stories. This contributed to strengthening my ability to display sufficient affection required to secure trust and also maintain a non-judgemental disposition. The interviews and discussions were conducted in a flexible manner, allowing the interviewees to freely express themselves and this sometimes translated into deviating from the focus questions and also spending more time during the interview process.

The Intervention Phase Challenges

Securing Access for Social Action in a Divided Context

The goals of the intervention were to foster positive orientation towards constructive resolution, bridge the communication gap between both communities and also provide opportunity for the transformation of inter-communal perceptions. Beyond the myriad of challenges that were experienced at the initial stage of the fieldwork, more obstacles were encountered during the intervention stage of the research which involved the implementation of a social change project between both communities. The project entailed the implementation of separate interactive workshops in both towns and joint meetings between members from both sides.

Change in Disposition Towards the Project

At the early stage of the project that is during the exploration phase, the prospects for the interactive workshop seemed high as both displayed positive dispositions towards the idea. However, things took a different turn few days before the proposed date for the workshop, as the enthusiasm earlier displayed took a downward turn with both sides calling for a temporal hold off of the joint meeting. The change of disposition was precipitated by resurging controversies over land ownership as a result of farming activities. Resultantly, interactions between both sides deteriorated considerably with one community explicitly stating lack of trust and fear as reasons for their withdrawal from the joint program. Although there was still some underlying display of enthusiasm for the meeting, both sides were hesitant about committing to a joint meeting during that period.

Access to Participants

However, one community was significantly more disposed to a joint encounter whilst the second was more reluctant. It is important to note the influence of the closed and centralised nature/systems of both towns where individual or group engagements with the other community are subject to the approval of the leaders thereby rendering notions of a discreet joint meeting highly unfeasible. What this means is that inter-communal activities must be sanctioned by the authorised leaders. As a result of this arrangement, access to the pre-determined target population for the study which was primarily youths within a certain age range (19–35) was limited as the emergent population consisted of a mixture of old and young people, the older people were executives of youth associations in the communities. The explanation offered for this population composition was the sensitive nature of the meeting as well as the role of the leaders as the essential bridge to broader members of the community. A youth executive explained that "we are in charge of the youths in our community, we hand them instructions and they will act according to how we tell them to." However, other silent unspoken factors could allude to power differentials and the monopolisation of such programmes by the elites of the communities.

Period of Silence

During the period of silence when the communities disengaged from the project, personal anxiety over the feasibility of the programme heightened particularly because of the timeline allocated to the dissertation thus raising broader concerns about the appropriateness of projects of this nature for doctoral degrees. However, a persistent commitment to the project was driven by the glimpse of hope evidenced though the favourable disposition of one community and a promise for re-consideration on the other side. During the waiting period, interactions with key members of both sides provided additional support for sustaining the vision of the project.

The design and structure of the emergent meeting was primarily informed by knowledge gleaned from interactions with key members of both communities (those that have been involved with peace programmes). Also noteworthy is the impact of interactions with network of professionals such as lecturers, NGO workers and a high-level government official. Majority of these people were familiar with the conflict and were able to offer beneficial perspectives and recommendations. Apart from providing moral support, these perspectives helped stimulate reflections that positively influenced the trajectory of the project. Thus, highlighting the importance of a support team in undertaking a research of this nature.

Navigating Emergent Gridlock

A central key that was employed to navigate the gridlock to participation in the workshop was giving the community control over the progress of the project, this entailed allowing the communities decide when and how to proceed with the project. This is parallel with the notions of democratic participation and local ownership of the process which are the central principles of action research. An increased involvement of participants with the social action has been linked to a corresponding increase in empowerment and relevance of transformative processes for beneficiary communities (Ganann, 2013, p. 345).

The youth leadership of both communities were given the task to deliberate and set up a convenient date and meeting point for the joint intervention. Although this took a longer period, it enabled the communities adopt a structure that was best suited to their needs in terms of security, this is also in line with the ethical requirements of "do no harm." To ensure the optimum execution of this task, some measure of distance or space was accorded to ensure that they carried out this responsibility in their best interest.

However, follow ups were made intermittently with little or no pressure for the joint meeting. The follow-ups took the form of periodic phone calls and courtesy visits to both communities. I find this to be useful in that it demonstrated a genuine concern for the wellbeing of both communities that went beyond the acquisition of a degree. The influence of such emotive expression in developing the preserving attitude required for peacebuilding has been recognised (Fisher, 2014, p. 247). Occasional visits to both communities as well as attending peace promoting programmes such as a government initiated joint prayers between both communities did not only help deepen my knowledge but also served as a demonstration of my genuine concern towards the promotion of peace.

An acknowledgement of the impact of my commitment and demonstration of genuine concern for the promotion of peace was explicitly stated by the youth leaders of both communities during the joint encounter. This factor and emerging changes in the social climate contributed to securing participation for the joint and separate meetings which held 5 months after it was initially scheduled to hold. The changes in the social climate were motivated by emerging internal peace activities in both communities which contributed in stimulating attitudinal changes required for participating in the joint encounter. One of such activities was the hosting of a joint inter-religious prayer meeting which drew large attendance from both communities. During the prayer meeting a number of positive declarations were made towards attaining peaceful coexistence and this signalled a formal cessation to previously enforced social embargos and other belligerent actions. The programme facilitated a transformation in the attitudes of community members from both sides which had spill-over impact on their receptiveness towards the intervention. This transformation was particularly apparent in the more reluctant community. Building on the ongoing transformation, timely reminders and follow-ups were made to encourage representatives from both sides to engage in discussions about the joint encounter. Overall, a combination of the internal peacebuilding activities,

researcher's commitment and participants' ownership played crucial roles in the actualisation of the joint encounters.

A participatory approach was utilised during the meetings, this played an instrumental role in promoting experiential learning, mutual understanding and participant ownership of the process. Participant involvement was encouraged through perspective giving exercises that were facilitated by the researcher and assistant. During the joint encounter, ice breaking exercises were employed to achieve the aims of promoting knowledge acquisition and also initiating positive perceptual changes. The participatory approach contributed immensely to breaching the gap between the researcher and the participants by facilitating the deconstruction of preconceived notions of "all knowingness" attributed with the researcher.

The intervention was a contact-based intervention predicated upon the stipulations of the intergroup contact hypothesis and conflict transformation theory. As earlier mentioned, the central goal was to stimulate constructive changes in the perceptions and attitudes of community members. In order to mitigate the disruptive impact of the tensions prevailing in both communities, a two-staged approach that entailed the organisation of separate and joint interactive meetings with members of both communities were organised. The structure of the intervention guides that provided basic but flexible direction for the meetings was designed using ideas gleaned from literature on intergroup dialogues (Alternatives to Violence Project, 2002; Bajja et al., 2012; Francis, 2002). The separate interactive sessions were organised homogenously in each community, and they contributed to advancing the knowledge of participants on peace values and also boosting their commitment towards partaking in peacebuilding initiatives. The joint interactive sessions were instrumental for initiating perceptual changes and cementing ties between participants from both communities. An extensive description of the outcome of the project is beyond the scope of this article as the main focus is on the challenges that emanated during the course of implementing the project. A more detailed description of the outcome has been captured elsewhere (Akande et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The study has examined the challenges that were encountered in the course of implementing of an action research project in two divided communities in North-Central Nigeria. Although not an exhaustive account of the researcher's experience, the issues discussed are perceived to hold fundamental importance for acquiring general insights into the practicalities of action research in unconventional contexts. It shows methods of inquiry such as one-on-one interviews as insufficient for gathering heterogeneous information in volatile contexts especially when the focus is on sensitive issues like the prevailing socio-political climate. The difficulties associated with accessing vulnerable groups such as women and youths can be pragmatically negotiated by trust building activities/gestures and adopting simplified methodological tools.

Resultantly, it is recommended that the employment of qualitative techniques such as interviews in divisive contexts be complemented with other forms of data collection such as observation and informal conversation. It can be deduced that the act of conducting fieldwork in unstable regions is susceptible to a number of unprecedented methodological irregularities, many of which are not covered by rigid norms on research processes. Thus, reinforcing the primacy of context specific responses to such issues through flexible methodological responses which facilitate data collection and also ensure scientific rigour. The act of ensuring more harmony between the methods of inquiry and the demands of the context has been described as bricoleur ship in research (Tshabangu, 2009). In recognition of the limits of traditional approaches of knowledge creation in capturing the multi-varied interpretations of social

realities, proponents of bricoleur ship recommends incorporating new approaches that respondents to the demands of the inquiry in credible ways.

A central tool for effective investigation in divided context is sensitivity to emerging nuances and experiences in the study context. The researcher needs to take cognisance of the silenced underlying dynamics especially with regards to developments in the context of the substantial issues in the conflict. As much as possible, the researcher needs to keep abreast with latest developments and utilise such information for crucial decisions. Sensitivity is also important for discerning the motivations behind certain reactions to the research process and adopting relevant measures to address emerging issues. The study reinforces Atkins and Wallace (2012) position on the link between a researchers' values and the practice of action oriented research.

Action research is targeted at alleviating social malignancies and is thus entrenched in basic principles such as honesty, respect for others, these principles inform the manner in which research is conducted. This suggests that constructive implementation of action research is determined by the researcher's adoption of the essential values thus lending credence to the assertion that action research begins with the researcher (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Constructive reactions to fieldwork irregularities are partly dependent on the personal qualities of the researcher; some of which also include respect for key ethical values such as a commitment to do no harm principle and a genuine commitment to constructive transformation. The author's display of perseverance and genuine concern for the wellbeing of both communities immensely contributed to securing the consent and participation of both communities in the joint encounter. This makes apparent the value laden nature of such research endeavours thus reaffirming contrast between the ideologies of action research and dominant positivist approach which places emphasis on objectivity and value neutrality (Brydon-Miller, 2009; McAteer, 2013, p. 33).

The authors' experience further solidify the primacy of identity in the fieldwork in divided context, from the analysis it can be implied that the influence of identity is mediated by some factors among which is the nature of the socio-political climate, power differentials, issues in contention. There are a number of divergent perspectives on the issue of identity, one of which alludes to the inabilities of researchers in social contexts where they are dubbed as outsiders (Adetoun, 2005). This is mainly because their access to in-depth information is limited by the lack of necessary social connections and adequate knowledge of the host community. This was confirmed in the study as access to information was greatly aided by the influence and connections of the resource persons who are well recognised community members. This draws attention to the role of social connections in mediating the gap between outside researchers and their study context although this does not totally eliminate the emergence of variations in the research experiences of insiders and outsiders.

Conducting fieldwork in both sides of a divided society could be plagued by varying degrees of complexities, this means the challenges may differ from side to side, and a useful suggestion is having clear understanding of your emotions and adopting the outlook relevant to each context. This is in a way similar to what Reed (2012, p. 211) calls the multiple-personality where a researcher's mannerisms, language, dressing are regularly adjusted to fit the varying social landscapes of a diverse context. The study also reinforced the centrality of researchers' emotions during the researching polarised societies. This is an area that has not received much attention in the discourse on research methodology (Bowd & Alpaslan, 2010; Browne, 2013; Hume, 2007).

Emotions such as frustration, anger and fear are crucial factors that could impede or cut short the lifespan of a research, making explicit these affective emotions are thus important for giving a comprehensive picture of the research process. It provides the audience with the right lenses to interpret the research, it is undeniable the researcher is a central feature in the research

process especially in qualitative studies where the researcher makes crucial decisions about data collection (Ortlipp, 2008). It thus becomes imperative to provide a comprehensive and accurate picture of how the research process unfolded, this includes how the researcher's reflections were informed; how emotional factors such as sentiments and fear manifested and their impact or influence on the inquiry process. Documenting emotions and personal perspectives also helps facilitate the critical reflections necessary for maintaining a neutral stance, a stipulated condition for rigorous inquiry.

The study arouses basic reflections on the ethical issues of confidentiality and non-disclosure of identity of respondents as popularly propagated by the literature on methodology. Williamson and Prosser (2002, p. 589) alludes to this when they pointed traditional norms such as complete confidentiality as restrictive to the attainment of the goal of action research. In social change-oriented projects where the impact is partly or highly dependent on the participants' ability to influence community members, stringent rules may act as a threat to the actualisation of research objectives. This is particularly crucial in this age of consolidated information systems where internet platforms have become a key medium of influencing large population of people, attaining social transformation may be dependent on ability of change agents to publicly endorse transformation ideologies.

The influence of political structures on accessing the target population for research is another factor that deserves further consideration in contentious communities especially where social change-oriented projects are concerned. This calls for devising contingency plans or adjusting the research plan to respond to such developments. In the study context, the programme was extended in order to capture the targeted population. Months after the first joint meeting, another meeting was held with youths within the desired age range from both communities. Overall, the project has demonstrated the possibilities of social change research in polarised communities, the positive contribution of the intervention though not captured in this analysis is noteworthy.

However, it is important to note the influence of emerging changes in the interactions between both sides on the successful completion of the project which implies that such researchers are not self-sufficient but subject to developments in the context. To optimise efficiency, future projects should be preceded by an assessment of the potential methodological challenges and practical risks inherent in such contexts and a study of this nature will provide useful guidelines in this regard. To end this paper, a summary of the key learning points from the reflection are presented below:

- Conflict communities are characterised by several uncertainties hence ideologies of smooth progression or strict adherence to predetermined course of actions may not be realistic.
- There is a need for flexibility with regards to the choice of research techniques specifically the willingness to adopt unconventional sources of information like informal conversations.
- A demonstration of respect for the core values and principles of action research is important. Top on the list is genuine concern for the welfare of the communities, participation, sensitivity and resilience.
- It is important to engage deliberate measures to limit or mitigate the negative influence of personal emotions on the research process.
- Adequate acknowledgement for existing structures and systems in the community and proposed actions should be integrated or affiliated with mainstream change initiatives.

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