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## Investigators reflections on the process and experience of a mini-ethnographic case study research in Nigeria

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## Investigators Reflections on the Process and Experience of a Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Research in Nigeria

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## Investigators Reflections on the Process and Experience of a Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Research in Nigeria

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the investigator's reflections, both prospective and retrospective, on the process and experience of conducting a mini-ethnographic case study research in Nigeria. The research titled "Exploring barriers to women entrepreneurs in Enugu State Nigeria" was written to add to the body of knowledge on barriers facing some small-scale women entrepreneurs in the marketplaces in Nigeria. A mini-ethnographic case study design was used for this study, this methodology is a combination of ethnography and case study research that can assist a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. The data collection methods used for this study included open-ended semi-structured interviews, direct observation, reflective journaling, and field notes. Reflection enables investigators to engage in self-analysis throughout the research process. Reflections and experiences in the three marketplaces where the research took place, including interactions with the gatekeepers as well as the women entrepreneurs who shared their lived experiences, will be discussed.

### Keywords

Investigators Reflection, Ethnography, Qualitative Research, Mini-Ethnography, Case Study, Women Entrepreneurs, Small Scale Women Entrepreneurs

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## Investigator's Reflections on the Process and Experience of a Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Research in Nigeria

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*The purpose of this paper is to discuss the investigator's reflections, both prospective and retrospective, on the process and experience of conducting a mini-ethnographic case study research in Nigeria. The research titled "Exploring barriers to women entrepreneurs in Enugu State Nigeria" was written to add to the body of knowledge on barriers facing some small-scale women entrepreneurs in the marketplaces in Nigeria. A mini-ethnographic case study design was used for this study, this methodology is a combination of ethnography and case study research that can assist a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. The data collection methods used for this study included open-ended semi-structured interviews, direct observation, reflective journaling, and field notes. Reflection enables investigators to engage in self-analysis throughout the research process. Reflections and experiences in the three marketplaces where the research took place, including interactions with the gatekeepers as well as the women entrepreneurs who shared their lived experiences, will be discussed. Keywords: Investigators Reflection, Ethnography, Qualitative Research, Mini-Ethnography, Case Study, Women Entrepreneurs, Small Scale Women Entrepreneurs*

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### Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Research

Mini-ethnographic case study design is a combination of ethnography and case study research that can assist one in gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017; Storesund & McMurray, 2009; White, Drew, & Hay, 2009). Unlike traditional ethnography, which can last up to a year, a mini-ethnographic case study research can be conducted within a day, weeks, months, or a year. The focus of a mini-ethnographic case study is to enable the researcher the ability to answer the research question and not to establish transferability of the findings (Fusch et al., 2017; Storesund & McMurray, 2009; White et al., 2009). When properly conducted; a researcher can elicit deep and thick data (Schultze & Avital, 2011).

While there are several ways to elicit deep and thick data when conducting this type of research, I (all first-person references pertain to the first author) conducted a mini-ethnographic case study to explore what information small scale women entrepreneurs in Enugu State Nigeria need to overcome possible barriers that influence their business and economic development. I employed four different data collection methods: open-ended semi-structured interviews, direct observation, field notes, and reflective journaling, which allowed me to triangulate my data as a way to augment the quality of the research as discussed by Denzin (1979). I went to three local markets in Enugu State, Nigeria, where I spent 30 days in the field interviewing, observing, writing notes, and reflecting on my experience. Nine

themes emerged from my study: six major themes, one minor theme, and two unexpected themes. Unexpected themes are those themes that emerged during data analysis that were not foreseen.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the investigator's reflections on the process and experience of conducting a mini-ethnographic case study research in Nigeria. The research titled *Exploring barriers to women entrepreneurs in Enugu State Nigeria* was written to add to the body of knowledge on barriers facing some women entrepreneurs in the marketplaces in Nigeria. During the doctoral journey of the first author (Amaechi), the co-author of this article encouraged her to conduct a mini-ethnographic case study because of the unique approach to collecting and analyzing the data from multiple perspectives. Conducting a mini-ethnographic case study research allowed me to gain a rich and full understanding of the case under study with the participants in their natural environment. Case study design allowed me to bound my study by space and time because data collection occurred in the marketplace, the participants' natural environment. It also helped me to explore the social construct of the participants' lived experience. This paper is not a report of that study's findings, but rather an essay discussing researcher reflections on the research process.

### **Reflection**

Reflection is an important data collection tool that enables investigators to engage in self-analysis throughout the research process (Anderson, 2012). This practice gives researchers the opportunity to reflect on their role concerning the phenomenon that is being observed through writing (Buda & McIntosh, 2013; Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012; Walker, Read, & Priest, 2013). Reflection can be defined as an expertise enhancing metacognitive tacit procedure where processes are informed by personal experience (Anderson, 2012; Applebaum, 2014; Charon & Hermann, 2012). Further, reflexivity allows the researcher to turn the lens back to him or her (Berger, 2013; Charon & Hermann, 2012; Cumming-Potvin, 2013). Reflexivity also enables qualitative researchers to acknowledge their own background as well as the effect their background can have on the study and the findings of that study. Reflexivity can also be characterized as consisting of two interrelating elements-prospective and retrospective (Attia & Edge, 2017; Forbes, 2008). Prospective reflexivity deals with the effect the researcher has on the study, and retrospective reflexivity deals with the effect the research process have had on the investigator (Attia & Edge, 2017; Forbes, 2008). Therefore, prospective reflexivity enables the researcher to understand the importance of the knowledge, values, and feelings that are associated with the research questions that were formulated, the method of data analysis that he or she used, and the subsequent findings that emerged from the study. Retrospective reflexivity, on the other hand, enables the researcher to recognize and appreciate how they have developed through the research process (Attia & Edge, 2017; Forbes, 2008).

It is important to note that although the dual authorship of this article will continue, the first author (Amaechi) will narrate the documentation associated with the field experience. While I reflected on several events during the research process in Nigeria, I have chosen three significant areas of concentration for this paper: my experience in the marketplace, my experience with the gatekeepers, and my experience with the women entrepreneurs.

## **The Marketplace**

During the research process, I visited three marketplaces in Enugu State, and each of them was unique in the way they were built, and arranged, as well as the individuals within them. For example, although some trading occurred outside, the majority of the first marketplace I visited, it was enclosed with high zinc and wood to support it. There was a walkway in the middle; therefore, retailers mainly sat outside of their stalls and shops and welcomed customers or observed those passing by. As people walked past, some retailers called out to customers to purchase products from them. Also, there were several people with wheelbarrows transporting goods from one part of the market to the next. The market was very noisy. Every so often, one could hear the wheelbarrow men and women, shouting at an individual or a group of people to allow them to pass in Igbo language (*uzo, uzo, uzo*) as they transported goods from one part of the market to the next.

Each store often had goods displayed from the outside and on the inside so that customers could appreciate what the retailers had in stock and make the decision to either buy or move on to the next seller. To make goods available to customers, most retailers who had shops or stalls often displayed their goods by hanging them from the ceiling and makeshift walls both inside and outside the stores. Some of the goods often displayed in the stores and stalls included shoes, toothbrushes, laundry detergents, tomato paste, clothing, salt, cooking oil, soap, thread, hair extensions, milk, cereal, spices, and many other goods. For those shopkeepers who did not have stalls, but perishable retail or seasonal food stock, they tended to place their goods on a pallet, or spread clothing or plastic sheets on the ground to display their goods. They were also inclined to retail their goods near intersections where customers could easily locate them.

The setting of the second marketplace was somewhat different from the first market. For instance, the marketplace was more like an open market. Additionally, most of the trading occurred outside; the stalls and enclosures were further inside. To protect themselves from the sun and rain, most retailers had large multicolored umbrellas. Some of the umbrellas had logos with the words Maggi, Milo, or MTN on them, while others were just plain or colorful. Although the market was very close to the bus stop for easy pedestrian access, provisions were made for customers with vehicles to park their cars. Additionally, there were taxis parked by the entrance of the marketplace, as well as a type of taxi that is locally known as Keke Maruwa in which individuals transport smaller goods used to reach various destinations. When entering the marketplace, there were individuals selling fruits and vegetables such as watermelon, oranges, peas, lettuce, as well as other types of fruits and vegetables, who either sat or stood near their stalls and welcomed customers to come and purchase goods from them.

Behind them were individuals (mostly men) who sold yam tubers; in front of them were trucks, cars, and individuals who were unloading baskets and bags of what looked like tomatoes, onions, Irish potatoes, and lettuce from the trucks and cars. As one entered the marketplace, the umbrellas and stalls became shops where retailers also welcomed customers to purchase goods from them. The first day I visited this marketplace, I had a seller mistake me for someone else, as she welcomed me to come and purchase food stock from her. The seller asked why I had not been to her shop in such a long time. I smiled, stopped, and explained to her that she seemed to have mistaken me for someone else. The seller smiled and thanked me; however, I am not convinced that the seller believed me.

The third marketplace I visited was also different because, unlike the first two marketplaces, one could choose to commence their shopping from the roadside or outside the gate to the inside. As a result, this marketplace had different opening and closing times; one for the roadside market and the other for the market inside the gated area. Furthermore, due to

the nature of the market, individuals could decide to park their cars on the street or park their cars within the gated area. Those who chose to park their cars within the gated area had to pay for parking to two men, sitting by the gate. The gate was built in such a way that only one car could come in or leave at the same time. Beside the big gate was a smaller gate, where pedestrians could pass through. Two-story buildings, which were also used as shops, surrounded the marketplace.

As I moved towards the marketplace, I saw an opening, which led to the actual market. The inside of this market was structured like the second marketplace I visited; it was quieter than the first and second marketplaces. As I passed by, the retailers, mostly women welcomed me to purchase goods from them. Although these retailers were in shops, the shops were built in a way that made them look and feel like stalls. The shops were open on all sides, that way retailers could observe customers coming from anywhere within the marketplace. This marketplace was also mostly covered to protect customers and retailers from sun and rain; this was achieved by building extensions with wood to connect the zinc. There were fewer people in this marketplace than there were in both the first and second marketplaces. There was no sign of individuals transporting goods using wheelbarrows.

The overarching research question for the study I conducted was: What information do small scale women entrepreneurs in Enugu State, Nigeria need to overcome barriers that influence their business and economic development? Although I grew up in Nigeria and have been to similar marketplaces in the past, I was not sure what to expect, especially, since this visit was for a different purpose. However, prospectively, I expected that once I made the proper arrangements, the interview environment would be comfortable and that the interviewees would consent to and be available for the interview. Retrospectively, however, while the interviewees consented and were available for the interview, spending time in these three marketplaces enabled me to understand some of the barriers that could affect the economic development of those within the environment.

The issue of gaining access to a stall, a shop, or a place to display one's goods, for example, is a huge part of their economic development, as one cannot sell their goods if they have no place to display them. Once a place to display one's goods is secured, there is need for customers to purchase them. However, the way the marketplaces are designed could make it difficult to sell one's goods as there seems to be limited view of the displayed good when entering some parts of the marketplace. Further, the design and the activities that happen within the marketplace, particularly the first marketplace I visited, tend to make it difficult for buyers to concentrate when trying to make a purchase. For example, as reported above, most goods are transported using wheelbarrows, and since the spaces between the shops, stalls, and the roadway are narrow, buyers and sellers are often interrupted when one hears them screaming (*uzo, uzo, uzo*). This is because, one could be badly injured by them if great precaution is not taken. If a wheelbarrow accident does occur, besides the person apologizing profusely, all parties involved tend to go their way, with the person who was injured having to deal with all medical expenses.

The reason is because, wheelbarrow transportation tends to be a menial work and people are paid very little. Therefore, both buyers and sellers must be conscious of their environment because sellers do not want their customer to be injured and buyers do not want to be injured, as they understand the consequences. This conscious awareness could affect where a buyer chooses to shop for their goods and services, and hence, it could reduce the amount of money individuals in the marketplace could earn and, in turn, their economic development.

## **The Gatekeepers**

As I reflect on my experiences in the marketplaces, one aspect that stands out was my interaction with gatekeepers. Gatekeepers have assumed some roles, which is mostly seen as their way of protecting individual and organization's interest such as hospitals, nursing homes, and schools (Gallo et al., 2012). A direct observation of marketplace #1 on April 11, 2016, for example, indicated that gatekeepers exist within this marketplace as they were very interested in knowing my reason for being there. There seemed to be a level of agitation or apprehension when some individuals saw me with my pen and paper within each of the marketplaces.

When I arrived at P2's stall, although P2 welcomed me and was willing to participate in my study, the individuals (mainly men) around her stall were very vocal about my presence there. It is important to note that they did not have any rights over whom P2 spoke with or her activities within the marketplace; however, they insisted on knowing my reason for being there. The gatekeepers did so by speaking very loudly, to ensure that they disrupted my conversation with her. I later learned that the reason behind the nervousness and agitation had its origin with government agents and tax collectors who often came into the marketplace to collect taxes. Participants might have thought that the government had asked me to come and study them so that they could come back later to tax them, which might explain why most individuals tended to observe my every movement when I passed by their shops or stalls. Each time I noticed their nervousness, I smiled and, if they asked, I would quickly explain my reason for being there. Once they were satisfied with my explanation, some would engage me, while others would carry on about their business.

Further, my first encounter with P12 was her questions to me "are we safe?" Based on my previous experience with gatekeepers in the other marketplaces, I quickly realized that she was asking that question based on the pen and paper I was holding. I quickly seized the opportunity to engage with her. I explained what I was there for, and she and those around here seemed to relax after my explanation (P12 personal communication, April 26, 2016). My other gatekeeper encounter occurred near P3's stall, where a man selling spices, whose stall was next to P3's stall, he, again wanted to find out my reason for being there. I politely explained that I was there for research; I also showed him the book containing my field notes as further evidence to explain my reason for being there. That, however, was not enough for him, as he stood as close to me as possible to listen in on my conversation with P3. The place was very noisy, due to the nature of the marketplace. As a result, it was a little difficult for him to hear what I was saying so, he tried to observe what I was doing instead. Once he realized that we were no longer paying attention to him, he concentrated on selling his spices instead (direct observation of marketplace #1, April 11, 2016).

A direct observation of P9 (direct observation of marketplace #2, April 23, 2016) indicated this lack of trust, as I overheard some individuals within the area asking about my reason for being in their midst. For example, I heard one say, "you all need to watch that girl, are you sure she is here for research? She was probably sent here by someone to spy on us." Another individual also followed me around, observing my every move. She listened to everything I said and made sure that she saw what I was doing while I was there. Additionally, I believe that my ability to speak the Igbo language allowed me speedy entrance into all the groups I encountered while in each of the marketplaces. For example, although I spoke the Igbo language, my dialect was different from most of the gatekeepers I came across at each of the marketplaces.

Language served as an icebreaker, as most individuals I met endeavored to guess my state of origin once they heard me speak and, as a result, would try to find something in common with me. While I was meeting the acquaintance of the gatekeepers in marketplace



two, a man came by, heard my dialect and said, “it looks like you are from our side.” In this context, this usually means an individual who is from a particular part of the eastern states of Nigeria. Since this was not the first time I have had that said to me, I said yes. He proceeded to ask, “which area, in particular, are you from?” When I mentioned my local government and village, although he was not too familiar with both, he made every effort to locate its neighboring villages and towns to continue the conversation. I had similar conversations and experiences with individuals I met in all three marketplaces.

Prospectively, I did not know that gatekeepers existed in the marketplace, and as a result, did not anticipate that I would encounter them. Encountering them however, enabled me to learn more about who they are and their representation within the marketplaces that I visited.

As mentioned above, I did not anticipate having an encounter with gatekeepers during my research as I had no knowledge of their existence within the marketplace. Retrospectively, however, I encountered them in each of the marketplaces I visited, and I began to take note of their existence and role. For example, my experience with P2 occurred in the first marketplace I visited. During my visit with her, they tried everything to disrupt our conversation and as a result discourage her from speaking to me. One even reminded her about her inability to read or write and as a result could be coaxed into signing something that could negatively affect her in the future. Further, my experience with P12 occurred in the third marketplace and once she understood my reason for being there, she was willing to participate in the research with no further hesitation. And my experience with P9 occurred in the second marketplace. While there, some men who saw me invited me to come and sit with them while they worked. However, some protested the idea of welcoming a stranger in their midst but could not act on it because the person who extended the invitation was one of the leaders. It is important to note that there were not a lot of men around the participants I interviewed in the third marketplace, which could be the reason she easily agreed to participate in the research.

With this knowledge of gatekeeper’s existence and their role in the marketplace, in the future, I would endeavor to mitigate their potential disruption and discouragement of research participants by meeting the acquaintance of anyone I see within the area of a research participant before the research commences, that way, everyone can have an understanding of my reason for being there, and as a result, ease their nervousness. This would be most important in an environment where the participant is surrounded by men. In addition to language, meeting the acquaintance of everyone around a research participant can also act as an icebreaker as well as speedy entrance into any group that I may encounter.

### **The Women Entrepreneurs**

I sought to conduct this study to gain a better understanding of the research phenomenon which in turn would form the basis of the proposed strategies that may help to address the issue of economic development among small scale women entrepreneurs. Fifteen women entrepreneurs based in Enugu State, Nigeria participated in this study, sharing their views and lived experiences with me. During the interview, participants displayed passion and a deep sense of responsibility as they provided answers to the interview questions. Some participants noted that the case under study was not only timely but also needed at this time in the country. Some also mentioned that they agreed to participate in this study because they believed it was for the wellbeing of other women entrepreneurs.

The women entrepreneurs indicated that they hoped the research findings would enable them to advocate for a swift and effective implementation of the research recommendations by key stakeholders. Besides a few participants who mentioned business

difficulties, I was touched when I heard about other difficulties most participants endured during the interview. For example, P8 became emotional when discussing the business and personal difficulties she faced since the death of her husband. She explained how the family became poverty stricken due to her husband's lengthy illness and death. She also described how difficult life became for the family after his death and how the children sometimes went to bed without food.

I remembered reflecting in my journal entries about the participant's difficulties, and how similar her situation was to my grandmother's situation. As the story went, my grandfather died leaving my grandmother with nine children to raise all by herself. Most of the children were still very young when this incident happened. So I imagined participant 8 trying to raise small children with little to no money like my grandmother had to do. When I went back to Nigeria to stay with my grandmother as a young child, I saw some after effects of this incident because there were times when life was still somewhat difficult for the family, even after so many years had gone by and some of the children had grown up. My grandmother had to feed all her children with her meager primary school teacher salary; sometimes she had to borrow money to make ends meet. This she did until some of her children grew up, completed their education, secured employment, and started helping with raising the younger ones, which was a huge relief for my grandmother.

I was impacted by P8's lived experience because it validated what I knew to be true concerning some women in general. As a result, my passion and desire to help women, children, and youth, particularly women entrepreneurs who are willing and able to work to have the opportunity to do so, has been rekindled. In this way, they will not have to endure the pain of watching their children go to bed hungry, as P8 had to endure.

Prospectively, I expected that the research participants would provide open and candid answers to the interview questions as it relates to their experiences, and the resulting data obtained would be reliable and valid. I also expected that the findings from this research would result in more research, training, and mentorship for small scale women entrepreneurs, first in Enugu State Nigeria, and then, in other developing nations around the world.

As indicated above, retrospectively, my experience with the women entrepreneurs while conducting this research was humbling. It was humbling because, it allowed me to understand their lived experiences and reminded me of my experience as a young girl, where I watched my grandmother and other women around me struggle to survive in a patriarchal society. For example, research has shown that most women do not become entrepreneurs by choice, but are pushed to become one, usually to make ends meet with little to no training.

Further, it is important to note that most of the women who participated in the research process understood the reason for it and participated because of their belief in the wellbeing of other women entrepreneurs. They also believed that a swift and effective implementation of the research recommendations by key stakeholders could help develop them economically.

As a result, I created an organization that focuses on providing research-based entrepreneurial training and mentorship for small scale women entrepreneurs in Enugu State Nigeria and other developing nations. Since earning my degree, I have traveled to several developing nations including Nigeria on a yearly basis to conduct and offer research-based entrepreneurial training and mentorship to small scale women entrepreneurs, while also partnering with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), Governmental Agencies, institutions, and or individuals with similar interests to ensure progress and impact measurement.

## Discussion

I discussed the investigator's reflections on the process and experience of mini-ethnographic research which was the focus of this article. Investigator's reflections which is defined as an expertise enhancing metacognitive tacit procedure where processes are informed by personal experience (Anderson, 2012; Applebaum, 2014; Charon & Hermann, 2012), enables the researchers to reflect on the choices made during the research process, including the type of data that was gathered and why. That way, researchers do not go into the field with preconceived notions about the groups or individuals he or she is studying. Reflexivity is also an important data collection tool that enables investigators to engage in self-analysis throughout the research process, thus, engaging in the opportunity to reflect on their role concerning the phenomenon that was being observed through writing (Anderson, 2012). The authors began by explaining the use of ethnographic case study as the research methodology, and the first author (Amaechi) reflected on her retrospective and prospective experiences in the three marketplaces where the research took place, the gatekeepers she encountered, as well as the women entrepreneurs who shared their lived experiences with her. These have resulted in the creation and offering of research-based entrepreneurial training and mentorship of the small-scale women entrepreneurs, as well partnerships with organizations with similar interests.

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