



## Journal of Organizational Ethnography

Multiple levels of "knowing and being known", their affiliated capital, benefits and challenges

Barbra Natifu

### Article information:

To cite this document:

Barbra Natifu , (2016), "Multiple levels of "knowing and being known", their affiliated capital, benefits and challenges", Journal of Organizational Ethnography, Vol. 5 Iss 3 pp. 219 - 234

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOE-09-2015-0022>

Downloaded on: 11 November 2016, At: 01:58 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 36 other documents.

To copy this document: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 14 times since 2016\*

### Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2016), "Roles and identity work in "at-home" ethnography", Journal of Organizational Ethnography, Vol. 5 Iss 3 pp. 235-257 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOE-07-2016-0015>

(2016), "After Herzog: blurring fact and fiction in visual organizational ethnography", Journal of Organizational Ethnography, Vol. 5 Iss 3 pp. 202-218 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOE-07-2016-0017>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

### For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit [www.emeraldinsight.com/authors](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/authors) for more information.

### About Emerald [www.emeraldinsight.com](http://www.emeraldinsight.com)

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

\*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

# Multiple levels of “knowing and being known”, their affiliated capital, benefits and challenges

Multiple levels  
of “knowing  
and being  
known”

219

Barbra Natifu

*Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway*

Received 15 September 2015

Revised 5 July 2016

25 July 2016

Accepted 27 July 2016

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the position of a former insider with multiple levels of knowing and being known, afforded me benefits and challenges in a complex higher education institution in Uganda. A reflexive autoethnographic account of the author’s research experience is employed as methodology. The study observes various benefits and challenges of this position. These include: firsthand knowledge of institutional culture and informants, leading to multiple levels of access; ability to conduct enriching interviews; and good rapport with informants. The challenges include: complexity of the institution; ethical challenges; power dilemmas; and anonymization of data. Access was noted to be a key benefit and it was experienced at five levels: personal relational networks; informant’s knowledge of a family relation; links to institutional and national networks; the role of media; and situational factors. In accordance with Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of forms of capital, the study established that four levels of knowing were linked to social, cultural, economic or media capital. The study reveals existence of a link between different levels of knowing and being known and their affiliated forms of capital. It shows that possession of any or a combination of these forms of capital leads to what the study defines as “information access capital.” The study suggests that the different levels of knowing and being known determine the breadth and depth of a researcher’s information access capital. The study implies that power imbued relationships can limit access.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper applies a reflexive autoethnographic methodology where the author uses their personal research experience to make sense of the benefits and challenges of gaining access as a former insider with multiple identity positions. The paper draws from the author’s personal experience (auto) set in an institutional cultural context (ethno), to analyze the research process (graphy) of gaining access of top and middle management informants. First person (auto) accounts of the author’s organizational cultural (ethno) and research process (graphy) experiences and how they link to the benefits and challenges of researching an organization as insider are used as data.

**Findings** – The study observed various benefits and challenges of the insider position. These include: firsthand knowledge of institutional culture and informants, leading to multiple levels of access; ability to conduct enriching interviews; and good rapport with informants. The challenges include: complexity of the institution; ethical challenges; power dilemmas; and anonymization of data. Access was noted to be a key benefit experienced at five levels: personal networks; informant’s networks; institutional networks; the role of media; and situational factors. The four levels were linked to social, cultural, economic or media capital.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study is limited to the researcher’s personal experience of the institution. The paper shows the role that social, work, political, media, institutional and national networks and their affiliated forms of capital play in affording insider researchers access. It shows that researchers deficient in these capitals have low-information access capital and face challenges of access. It also shows that although friendship may enable access, if infused with power dynamics, power hinders access. The study shows insider researchers in complex organizations have to continually navigate the insider-outsider continuum and challenges thereof. Practicing relational ethics during and after research is key when conducting organizational insider research.



Journal of Organizational

Ethnography

Vol. 5 No. 3, 2016

pp. 219-234

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited

2046-6749

DOI 10.1108/JOE-09-2015-0022

The author would like to appreciate the advice of the two anonymous reviewers and the *JOE* Editor that helped the author to improve the quality of this paper.

**Practical implications** – The paper shows the role that social, work, political, media, institutional and national networks and their affiliated forms of capital play in affording insider researchers access. It shows that researchers deficient in these forms of capital have low-information access capital and face challenges of access. It also shows that although friendship may enable access, if infused with power dynamics, power serves as hindrance to access. The study also shows insider researchers in complex organizations may have to continually navigate the insider-outsider continuum and challenges thereof. Practicing relational ethics during and after research is a key consideration of insider researchers.

**Social implications** – The paper reveals the challenges of accessing top and middle management in complex, bureaucratic and guarded higher education organizations. It shows that although higher education institutions, by virtue of their research orientated missions, should ideally set the right example for easy access to information at all levels and ranks of the organization. However, the reality of access for an insider research may be far from the ideal due to factors of complexity and previously formed power imbued relationships.

**Originality/value** – The paper contributes to understanding factors at play when gaining and maintaining research access to top and middle management in a higher education context. In accordance with (Bourdieu's, 1986) concepts of forms of capital, the paper contributes to understanding the relationship between multiple levels of knowing and their affiliated forms of capital and how these capital forms may facilitate information access. It shows that possession of any capital form increases a researcher's information access capital. The paper expands Weinreb's (2006) definition of stranger and insider interviews, by showing multiple ways of "knowing or being known" before and during the study.

**Keywords** Uganda, Insider research, Higher education institution, Autoethnography, Forms of capital, Information access capital, Institution

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

This study is an autoethnography of my personal experience of conducting research in a higher educational institution in Uganda, East Africa, where I had been an insider for a period of five years. My position as an insider consisted of multiple identities, as I was both formerly an undergraduate student of this institution for a period of three years and I also had worked in the institution as a Public Relations Officer (PRO) for a period of two years. This shows that from the organizational perspective and that of some of my informants, I was their former student, colleague, employee and friend now turned researcher. Thus, I investigated this institution as a researcher who had multiple identities owing to the multiple insider experiences and relationships I had. This position had its practical benefits and challenges.

Hence, the following are the specific research questions guiding this study:

- RQ1.* What are the benefits and challenges of conducting research in a higher education institution in Uganda by a former insider with multiple identities?
- RQ2.* To what extent does the position of insider afford one access to informants and information in a complex organization?

The study aims at illuminating the extent to which the position of insider plays a role in affording an insider researcher access to elite informants in a higher education context in Uganda. It particularly examines how the position of an insider with multiple identities (levels of "knowing and being known") can benefit or challenge access to elite informants in a complex and information guarded organizational context.

The institution is described as "complex" as universities are structurally complex and bureaucratic organizations (Weber, 1947/1981). The institution also fits the description of "information guarded" because at the time of this study (2010), it had a centralized administration and management culture that closed out PROs from

---

accessing management information (Natifu, 2016). This suggests that if internal staff had difficulty in accessing management information, researchers would also face similar challenges.

For this study I focus on examining how I was able to gain access to top and middle management within the university I investigated for my doctoral studies. The thesis aimed at investigating how the institution's identity was constructed and managed. This study limits its analysis to the benefits and challenges of gaining access to top and middle management and PROs. I conducted 23 interviews with various informants including one member of the university council, 11 members of the current and past internal top management, nine PROs and two academic staff association management. Although there were 23 planned interviews, the number rose to 26 with three additional unplanned interviews, gained as a function of various levels of being known. By examining actual experiences of accessing university top and middle management, this study aims to add to the limited empirical studies of access to all ranks of organizational management. The study also aims at contributing to understanding the relationship between informant access and the multiple levels of knowing and being known and their affiliated forms of capital. This is as these levels of knowing and being known were intricately linked to various forms of capital which served as enabling factors (benefits) through which access to informants and information was gained. The five multiple levels of access include: personal relational networks; informant's knowledge of a family relation; links to institutional and national networks; the role of the media; and situational factors. Except for the situational factor, the first four levels of access radiated some form of social, cultural, economic or media capital. Hence, in discussing the benefits of access that I experienced as insider, I draw from Bourdieu's (1986, 2012) concepts of forms of capital.

The study shows that in addition to the benefits of access gained from the multiple levels of knowing and being known, the insider position also had other benefits. These include: firsthand knowledge of institutional culture and informants; ability to conduct enriching interviews; and good rapport with informants. The position also posed a number of challenges which include: complexity of the institution; ethical challenges; power dilemmas; and anonymizing data.

### Literature review

Merton (1972) defined an insider as an individual who possesses a prior intimate knowledge of the community and its members. Merton's definition emphasizes the individual's prior knowledge of the community and members they research without necessarily being members. Trowler (2011) notes that what counts as "inside" depends on the researcher's identity positioning. Insider positionality refers to, "the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity (*who they are*) which is aligned or shared with participants" (Chavez, 2008, p. 475). Chavez (2008) further argues that insiders who share multiple identities or profound experiences with the community they research may be considered total insiders. However, this study shows a gap in the claim to total insider positioning being merely a function of multiple identities, when the factor of organizational complexity is considered.

Similarly, many insider studies have underscored a number of benefits of conducting insider research (Alvesson, 2003, 2009; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Trowler, 2011). The insider researcher is said to be better positioned to tell the true story of the organization and to, "draw attention to one's own cultural context [...]" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 175).

One of the key benefits of the insider position is that it affords insider researchers easier access to informants and information by virtue of being known. However, the scope of these levels of knowing and being known has not been explored in all its form. This study draws from Weinreb's (2006) definition of insider as it articulates a wider scope of relational ties that distinguish an insider from a stranger researcher. Weinreb (2006) notes that, "the single most important characteristic that distinguishes insider interviewers from stranger-interviewers is whether they know or are known by the respondent or the respondent's family". "To know" or "be known" refers to "a social relationship unrelated to and predating specific interactional roles associated with interviewers and respondents" (Weinreb, 2006, p. 1015). Whether the status of knowingness in all its manifestations, has to always predate the research process is a contested claim given the role of the media to effect knowingness during the research process as the study reveals.

Nonetheless, Weinreb's conception is important as it shows that a diversity of social relationships are implicit in the notion of "knowing and being known." His concept of insider is important to understanding Bourdieu's (1986, 2012) forms of capital that capture a diversity of personal and organized levels of knowing that served as enabling factors to access in my experience.

Various studies have demonstrated the role of both network and participatory social capital as an important mechanism that generates information exchange (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1995; Wellman *et al.*, 2001). Coleman (1988) noted that trust, information and norms are characteristics of social relations. "Network capital is derived from informal relations with friends, neighbors, relatives and workmates [...]" (Wellman *et al.*, 2001, p. 437; Wellman and Frank, 2001, p. 2). Participatory capital is gained through associational memberships that afford people opportunities to bond and articulate their demands (p. 437). Although these are useful theoretical lenses, I choose to use Bourdieu's (1986, 2012) various concepts of forms of capital as they better articulate the actual experiences I encountered in the field.

Bourdieu (1986) defines capital or wealth as existing in three forms, i.e. economic, cultural and social capital. Economic capital has to do with the influence that the command over economic resources extends to the possessor.

Cultural capital pertains to the forms of knowledge; skills, education and training that an individual possesses that give them status in society. Cultural capital occurs in three forms: embodied, objectified, institutionalized. For this study the institutionalized form of cultural capital will be applied. Institutionalized cultural capital is revealed through institutional recognitions such as educational credentials possessed by an individual (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 47).

Social capital is defined as, "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). These networks constituted through personal relationships or membership in various groups convey, "[...] credit in [...] various senses of the word" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51). Social capital is made up of social obligations which may be convertible in certain conditions to economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital as this study shows is not only convertible to economic capital and institutionalized titles of nobility, but also to what the study defines as, "information access capital."

Information access capital is understood in this study as a resource that is available to any individual who possesses any of the various forms of capital; which can then be

---

implicitly converted by informants to afford them access to information. Possession of this resource serves as the means through which informants implicitly evaluate the depth and breadth of the information access worthiness of an individual, and in return offer this resource to them according to the amount of capital they have.

In addition to these three forms of capital I experienced a fourth form of capital (i.e. media capital). Media capital in this study will be understood as a form of social capital that implicitly influences access to information following media coverage of the researcher's study topic and identity. Geber *et al.*'s (2016) study showed that media capital derived through informational or entertainment use has positive effects on social capital (Geber *et al.*, 2016).

Besides its benefits, insider research presents challenges relating to themes of power, anonymity, difficulty of "making the normal strange," and ethics of discretion and friendship. These have been well-documented in the literature (Alvesson, 2003; Greene, 2014; Taylor, 2011; Trowler, 2011). However, some of the nuanced contextual challenges surrounding these themes have not been articulated. This is partly dependent on the unique positions and experiences of insider researchers, their specific point of entry into the organizational culture and the means employed to gain relational ties with informants.

For instance, Ellis (2007, pp. 9-13) demonstrates the relational ethical challenges of friendship as means to access. She shows that her point of entry into the field did not precede earlier knowledge of the community. Hence, she was to a large extent aware that she had to deliberately make friends with her informants, as a means of gaining access and hopefully leave the field successfully without destroying those friendships. However, for an insider who had already experienced an organizational culture (without necessarily setting out to research it), I had already formed relationships with informants and the challenge was not leaving but maintaining these relational ties. Thus, the relational ethical dilemmas one faces in this scenario are slightly different from a researcher without prior knowledge of a community or its members. Thus, this nuanced challenge is what this study aims to illuminate looking at the interplay of relational ethics and power challenges embedded in interviewing informants of a higher rank, age and experience with whom I had already formed friendship bonds.

Power is also a theme that has been documented in the insider research literature (Greene, 2014; Merriam *et al.*, 2001). Dahl (1957) defined power as, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (pp. 202-203). This definition shows that power is relational and individuals possessing more relational power, such as (A) can cause others (B) to do what they would not have wished to do. Merriam *et al.* (2001) argue that, "During fieldwork the researcher's power is negotiated, not given" (p. 409). However, the extent to which this negotiation is possible, given unique power scenarios is not well-explicated in the literature. This study uses the researcher's experience to highlight the nuances of power dynamics as defining the time and space of field interviews and limiting access to superior informants.

Besides power, the issue of anonymizing data when writing autoethnographic accounts in higher educational contexts is particularly challenging. Trowler (2011) notes that insider research in higher education contexts foregrounds the problem of institutional and personal anonymity and creates difficulties around citing information from reports and referencing these, because the institution is usually named in the titles. Even with use of techniques such as creating pseudonyms, obscuring identifying details and laying false trails in descriptions, changing small but unique details of the history, geography and characteristics, it is still possible to establish the identity of the researcher

and the institution researched (Trowler, 2011). This is most likely, especially if the author publishes under their own name. Floyd and Arthur (2012) note that, “a simple on-line research will allow the most novice investigator to identify the institution” (p. 8). Trowler (2011) recommends one, “[...] to assume that the reader will be able to identify your institution, should they wish to” (p. 3). I use this study to reveal particular challenges of anonymity that I experienced that are specific to my research and knowledge interests.

### **Uganda’s higher education environment and the university’s PR background**

Universities in Uganda have been undergoing many changes following internal and external factors. Some of the factors include: access, financing, mission, globalization and internationalization of higher education.

The issue of opening up access from elitism to mass access saw the emergence of private universities to meet the increasing demand for higher education services following population increase. Due to increasing demand for access to affordable higher education services within Uganda, the first private university began its operation in 1988 (Kasozi, 2003). Prior to this, Uganda was served by a single public university that had been in existence since 1922. By the time of this research (2010), there were 30 universities in Uganda of which 25 are private.

The privatization of higher education led to increasing relevance of professions such as public relations. In 1970 the institution hired its first PRO. I joined the institution’s Faculty of Arts in 2002 as PRO after my undergraduate studies at the same institution and left in 2004. The relational contacts that I narrate in this study as enabling my access were formed during my time as staff and student.

### **Methodology**

The study employs a reflexive organizational autoethnographic methodology to answer the research questions it poses. Autoethnography is, “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). The method uses personal narratives or ethnographic short stories that emphasize the self (auto) the culture (ethno) and research process (graphy) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Ellis *et al.* (2011) note that autoethnography seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno). Autoethnography is commended to have the advantage of humanizing research by relating the “personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Ellis *et al.* (2011) note that autoethnography is, “one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist”, (p. 2). I draw from Ellis *et al.*’s. (2011) insights to narrate how my organizational experience affected my research experience.

Similarly, Watson (2012) recommends that we treat ethnography as much more than a research method, but as a distinctive research type. This is because ethnographic researchers are open to a, “whole range of other investigative methods-from interviews and documentary analysis to perusal of statistics and even carrying out of small surveys,” from which they can draw observations and experiences to make sense of the broader cultural framework (p. 16). Thus in this study I draw from my experience of accessing informants using both interview method with top management and background surveys with middle managers.

I not only narrate my personal experience (auto) set in an institutional cultural context (ethno), but I also analyze the experienced research process (graphy) looking at the benefits and challenges of the insider research position. I present a personal and self-reflexive account of my research experience in an institution, where I had two levels of cultural experience as student and staff.

I adopt autoethnography as my choice of method because it enables me to add my voice as a researcher drawing empirical insight from a lived experience. As Wall (2006) argues the researcher's voice and experience matter, "If the researcher's voice is omitted, the result is the study is reduced to a mere summary and interpretation of the works of others [...]" (p. 3). Research that ignores the voice and insight of the researcher as being subjective has been criticized for being oblivious to the fact that a researcher with an insider's experience of the entity they research has a direct experience of the entity, and may also wish to draw knowledge insights from their firsthand experience. This fact suggests that the researcher has the "freedom [...] to speak as a player in a research project and to mingle his or her experience with the experience of those studied" (Wall, 2006, p. 3). This approach aims at giving voice to both the researcher and the informants, as a way of attaining reflexivity. Reflexivity involves deconstructing who we are and the ways in which our beliefs, experience and identity intersect with that of the participant (MacBeth, 2001). In this autoethnography, I deconstruct my personal experience with a reflexive analysis of how best I would have navigated some of the experiences I encountered in hindsight. Thus, in the actual process of writing this autoethnography, I derived my narrative accounts from memory, observed research experiences, hindsight and "epiphanies" – "remembered moments" which significantly impacted the knowledge trajectory of my research (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 3).

With regard to research ethics, I received consent to interview all the informants cited in the study. However, participant's prior consent alone is not sufficient in conducting and writing autoethnographies as situational factors encountered in the field demand the researcher to exercise a high level of judicious situational ethics during the research process. Ellis and Adams (2014) emphasize the need to respect and protect informants by cultivating sustainable and respectful relationships with communities studied. This is as autoethnographic researchers, "cannot leave the metaphorical field, we cannot easily run away from our identities and experiences, neighbors and colleagues, friends and family" (p. 266). Consequently, Ellis (2007) recommends the need to practice "relational ethics," by seeking informed consent, respecting participants by avoiding their exploitation and protecting their identities by, "masking identifying details of people participating in our studies" (Ellis and Adams, 2014, p. 267). In compliance with these ethical considerations, names of informants and the name of the institution under study are not disclosed. Although as Trowler (2011) observes, institutional anonymity is not guaranteed when researching higher education contexts, rather emphasis ought to be placed on protection of informants.

### **Autoethnographic insights from the field**

I set out to conduct my field research in an institution where I was a former insider. I had been an undergraduate student at this university from August 1999 to June 2002. I had also worked with the university between July 2002 and July 2004 as PRO for the then Faculty of Arts. This gave me a five year experience with the institution, first as an undergraduate student and later as an employee. These two insider positions gave me the positionality of an insider researcher with multiple experiences of the institution I researched. This had its benefits and challenges as this autoethnography shows.

Multiple levels  
of "knowing  
and being  
known"



**Benefits of insider position***Firsthand knowledge of institutional culture and informants*

The insider position afforded me the benefit of knowledge of the institution's culture at two stakeholder levels. As a student, I gained insights into the university culture through academic and social interactions with students and staff and formed friendships with students and staff.

As staff I had forged friendship with various members of the staff (e.g. managerial, academic, administrative and support staff). I consider my student and collegial interactions and experiences as the first level of my insider experience. In the course of seeking for interviews, I noticed that some of my informants agreed to offer me interviews, not because they were acquainted with me, but because they were acquainted with a member of my family. This revealed the second level of the "insider-interviewer" notion that is slightly different from what Weinreb (2006) describes above. It revealed that the insider-interviewer advantages of access could also be extended basing not just on the fact that the interviewer "knows or are known by the respondent or the respondent's family" (p. 1016), but also due to the fact that the informant knows a member of the interviewer's family.

The third level of access was gained because informants were acquainted through formal institutional collaborations with the institution and country I represented as a former insider turned external researcher. The fourth level of access was gained through the role of the media while the fifth level was a consequence of situational factors.

*Access through multiple levels of knowing and being known and affiliated forms of capital*  
*First level of access, through personal relationships.* The first level of access was gained through personal relational contacts forged during my primary experience with the institution as student and staff. Having primary experience with the institution had the benefit of availing me with access to not just my select group of informants, but to a number of additional informants. There were a total of three unplanned and volunteered interviews that I gained from meeting former acquaintances, friends or former educators. One such friendly informant was my former undergraduate professor. He was generous enough to offer his time and shared his expertise on the role of socio-political factors in influencing identity and reputation changes of the university.

Besides access gained through my time as a student, I gained access from collegial acquaintances and friends as well. One such informant was a department head in the Faculty of Arts. He volunteered a short 20-minute discussion on my research topic where he mostly expressed skepticism on the place of business in academia.

The third voluntary informant was a representative of the private sector in the university senate. He shared insights pertaining to his work that mainly involved lobbying the University Council to close the gap between the university and the private sector. I thought that his insights though interesting were not particularly in line with my specific research interests. This demonstrates that the insider researcher may be availed with too much information which requires them to sieve out what is relevant. In terms of capital, this level of access demonstrates the role that personal relationships play in conveying social capital credit that can be converted to information access capital (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51).

*Second level of access, through informants' knowledge of a family member.* The second level of access was gained through informants' knowledge of a family relation of mine in various capacities. One such informant was one of the academic staff association managers who said he had worked with my father. He seemed to be a rather

busy man and accorded me a 39-minute interview. Within this allotted time, he quickly responded to my questions with short and brief responses in order to save time to get back to his duties. If he had not known a member of my family, it is probable I would not have gotten this interview.

Besides him, I gained interview access to a former PRO who was acquainted with a relation from his political affiliations. I had tried to get in touch with this informant in vain. However, on February 9, 2010 I tried calling this particular informant again. He finally answered my call. I remember, he first asked what my name was. Upon identifying my surname, he asked if I was related to a Mr X. I replied in the affirmative. His response was buoyant, saying he was busy, but would make time for a brief interview. He went on to explain that he knew my father from his off campus engagements in one of the oldest political parties in the country.

Thus, this second level of access shows that social capital gained through “membership in various groups conveys credit,” which is also convertible to information access capital (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51).

*Third level of access, through informant’s knowledge of researcher’s institutional affiliations.* The third level of access was gained through informant’s knowledge of the researcher’s external institutional and country affiliations. During the fieldwork, I noted that informants accorded me access because they were already acquainted with the country and institution I represented as an “external” researcher. This enabled me to access deans who had initially been difficult to access. Since, I was conducting mini surveys with this category of informants; I had asked my research assistant to distribute questionnaires to them. However, the rate of response was relatively low 9/22. So I had to take the questionnaires myself. Through the introductions and revelation of my external affiliations I was accorded access. In the end, the response rate rose to 13/22.

These positive responses were mainly gained from faculties that were in collaboration with the country I represented as external researcher. This country through its institutional development program had financially supported a total of 15 units in the university. Consequently, Deans from faculties that received this support were willing to grant me information access. Similarly, previously hard to access administrative and management officials too, were willing to allocate me interview time citing their knowledge of my external researcher country affiliations. This level of access shows that access was gained, not because informants knew me or my family, but because they knew and had an institutional networking relationship with the country that I represented as an “external” researcher.

From a research point of view, this experience shows that insider researchers with multiple identities, “may be simultaneously insiders and outsiders, challenging the concept of an ‘inside/outside binary’” (Floyd and Arthur, 2012, p. 172).

This level of access further revealed the interplay of Bourdieu’s (2012) economic and cultural forms of capital. It showed that these forms of capital may be intricately combined to foster access. The role of economic capital was evidenced in the fact that the institution had received funding from the nation I was affiliated to as an external researcher. The role of institutionalized cultural capital was also revealed through institutional recognitions noted at the introductory stage.

*Fourth level of access, through media coverage of researcher and researched.* The fourth level of access was influenced by the media through coverage of an opinion-editorial piece I had authored on the ongoing contentious policy issues, I encountered in the field. During the fieldwork, the institution’s management was planning to

implement a controversial policy that mandated all students to pay upfront fees within two weeks or consider themselves disqualified from higher education access. I responded to the ongoing debate, in an op-ed titled *Paying Upfront Fees Will Frustrate Needy Students*, published in both *The New Vision* and *Daily Monitor* newspapers. The timeliness and news value component in that piece led both English dailies to publish it on the same day, giving the issue and identity of researcher a double public visibility. This policy decision was not a good one in my view. I had shared this position with the then Acting Vice Chancellor (VC) when I got the opportunity to interview him. I got the impression that he was adamant in this decision and the solution was to engage the general public in the debate through an op-ed piece. Thus, the media became the best platform through which all affected stakeholders would constructively engage in the debate. The head of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), responded to this op-ed in a letter to the editor in which he supported the VC's decision. Other members of the general public also responded to the NCHE head's views and the debate became of public interest. Consequently, writing this piece had the impact of allowing me access formerly difficult informants to access, who opened the information access gate partly because they were interested in continuing the op-ed discussion. This research experience demonstrates that that the media has an impact to social capital which is then convertible to information access capital.

It further demonstrates that researchers may encounter ongoing issues in the institutions they research which compel them to action. As Floyd and Arthur, (2012) note insider researchers need to consider whether it is appropriate to act on the information they obtain through research. They note that a researcher's critical stance may undermine their expected loyalty to the institution. However, unlike a professional practitioner who is actively engaged in an organization, they note that a researcher needs to stand back and survey the evidence and choose the right action to take after judging the ethical and moral dilemmas inherent in the preferred action. In my experience, I thought simply watching and doing nothing was a much greater personal moral and social justice crime than speaking up.

*Fifth level of access, through a situational factor.* The fifth level of access was due to a "situational factor" encountered in the field. During the fieldwork, I coincidentally found one of my key informants, in the process of collecting data for his autobiography. His daughter had been conducting interviews with him throughout that week for autobiographic purposes. So when I asked for an interview it was gladly given as it was of mutual interest. This favorable situational encounter reinforced the level of honesty, accuracy and credibility of the historical materials that I obtained. The informant also asked permission to use the tape-recorded data I collected to avoid duplication of efforts. This incident shows that certain favorable situations encountered in the field may enable a researcher to gain access to in-depth and credible information, without necessarily having a prior knowledge of the informant.

*Ability to conduct enriching interviews.* Besides, the benefit of access, having an insider's view allowed for the ability to conduct enriching interviews free from impression management. The fact that I could identify with the informants increased the level of honesty with which informants shared the challenges they faced. Although there are different versions of "'truth' e.g. fiction or nonfiction; memoir, history or science" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 9); and autoethnographers value narrative truth as it reveals how a story is used and responded to. Since most PROs are "masters and mistresses of impression management [...]" (L'Etang, 2014, p. xxv) who relay stories

---

with a professional goal of impression management. Having an “insider” knowledge of the institution thus, protected me from PR’s impressionist narrative “truth” as I could counter it with experienced “truth.”

*Good rapport with informants.* Having a prior knowledge of the institution’s PR practice, allowed me to establish a good rapport with my informants during the interviews that allowed for an open and in-depth inquiry. It led to honesty and transparency as most informants perceived me as one of them and not a stranger. As the barrier of stranger was diminished, the depth of openness with which informants shared the challenges they faced deepened. For some informants such as the Senior Public Relations Officer (SPRO) I had a long and fruitful discussion (over five hours spread out in two days) as my acquaintance with this informant was at three levels. They were a friend, a former colleague and undergraduate and graduate classmate. This level of knowingness availed me with several off the record insights. I had other informants with whom I shared two levels of acquaintance as colleagues and former lecturers. These too availed me with off the record insights. This suggests that the depth and breadth of being known allows a researcher to gain access to off the record information which calls for high-ethical conduct on the part of the insider researcher.

Despite having a good knowledge of the institution, I had stayed away for some time and a lot had changed. For instance, during my time, PROs were not involved in management, but at the time of my interview, six years later, there was a SPRO who was a member of the management team. Therefore, it was important to listen with the keenness of a newcomer and not assume that the organization’s culture and professional PR status was still the same. This finding supports studies done by Carter (2004), Floyd and Arthur (2012) and Trowler (2011) that show the fluidity of the insider-stranger binary and the need to conceptualize these two distinctions as ever-changing continuums in practice and not binary opposites.

## **Challenges**

### *Organizational complexity*

Researching a complex organization with insider positionality had its limitations as my experience was only confined to a single faculty yet the institution is complex with over 22 faculties, schools and institutes and 110 departments. This meant that I had difficulty accessing informants from units that were off campus and literally strange to me. Even after several attempts, I got to the end of my fieldwork without ever gaining access to these informants. This challenging experience of access left me with the realization that access is not easily attainable without a certain degree of acquaintance with informants. This experience also shows that insider researchers researching complex organizations may be strangers in some units and will face similar access challenges that strangers do. It further shows the fluidity of the insider label when researching complex higher education settings.

### *Relational ethical challenges*

During my research, I faced two major relational ethical challenges. The first pertained to the ethical dilemma of interviewing friends who were also my superiors and elders. The second had to do with managing sensitive and actionable information gained through the fieldwork. Navigating the second ethical dilemma required the exercise of ethics of discretion. Actionable information on the other hand required personal weighing of the moral and ethical dilemmas inherent in doing something about the information or keeping silent.

Multiple levels  
of “knowing  
and being  
known”

Meanwhile, the issue of interviewing friends and former bosses was particularly challenging because professionally they were my superiors in rank and socially there were my friends and mentors. Though I was very much interested in getting their insights, the ethics of friendship and superiority power dilemmas caused me to decide against pursuing these interviews. As Ellis (2007) notes, relational ethics of friendship require living up to the obligations of friendship:

[...] a friend is truthful and opens herself up to you. A friend is trusted to have your well being at heart. A friend is loyal. A friend doesn't tell your secrets or knowingly do things that might hurt you" and that "real friends don't ask too many questions" (Ellis, 2007, p. 10, 12).

In my experience the issue of loyalty and not asking too many questions was a real struggle. The power dynamics too further complicated the ease of interviewing these informants, since they were my superiors in the organizational hierarchy. Yet in comparison, I was able to interview another close friend of mine the SPRO, as we shared a lot in common professionally and education-wise. However, in this particular situation, since this friendship was also infused with power challenges, power ended up inhibiting access to otherwise would be resourceful informants. Greene (2014) recommends the use of research assistants to conduct such friendship and power saturated interviews. Looking back, though I considered this possibility, the challenge was whether research assistants would be able to raise the interview to the same depth of understanding of experienced issues, just the way I would have done as an insider.

#### *Power dynamics*

The relational power differences between the researcher and some powerful informants presented not only challenges of access to information as shown above, but they also defined the time and space where the interviews were held. For instance, I called one of my informants a member of the university council, to seek for an interview placement. I made this phone call while walking past a busy market place. The intention of the phone call was not to conduct the interview then but to seek for an interview appointment. Nevertheless, the informant insisted on answering any questions that I had on the spot, even though I would have preferred a better setting. This experience demonstrates the role of power as influencing the researcher to comply with interview settings that they would not otherwise have chosen. Power dynamics in this case, are seen to determine the time and place of the interview.

#### *Anonymizing data*

During the writing process, one of the key challenges I encountered was complying with the ethics of anonymizing data to protect the institution and informants. The challenge is that writing requires reference to documents most of which have got the name of the institution included in the title. In order to overcome that challenge, I avoided referring to those reports to protect the institution's identity. Nevertheless as Trowler (2011) noted complete institutional identity protection is not guaranteed particularly in this information age.

Narrating oneself and what informants said about you at times means disclosing ones identity in the process of recounting a lived experience. There were writing situations that required revealing my identity and that of my relations. However, due to the ethical requirement of anonymity to foster blind peer review, I omitted these details and used Mr X to refer to a relation with whom we share a surname.

---

Complete protection of informants was a challenge especially as I needed to use the years in which they served, as a historical writing device that shows organization identity change and the passage of time. I used the years but did not disclose other subtle informant identity attributes (see Natifu, 2016).

Multiple levels  
of “knowing  
and being  
known”

## Discussion

The study shows that an insider researcher with multiple levels of knowing and being known obtains benefits and challenges during research. The benefits include: ability to conduct enriching interviews, gain rapport with informants and knowledge of organizational culture and informants which avails one multiple levels of access.

The study demonstrates that multiple levels of knowing and being known are intricately linked to various forms of capital. These forms of capital then afford a researcher information access capital, which determines the depth and breadth of information they receive. Thus, this autoethnography suggests that possession of any or a combination of some or all of these forms of capital (social, cultural, economic and media) serves as an enabling factor through which access to information is gained. It further suggests that possession of any form of capital is convertible to information access capital.

Furthermore, the study shows that levels of knowing and being known determine the depth and breadth of information informants are willing to share. For instance, while acquaintances gave shorter interviews, friends gave longer interviews. Multiple levels of knowing increased the chances of informant’s sharing of sensitive and off the record information. The study shows that the depths and breadths of levels of knowing and being known determine the amount of time and quality of information an informant is willing to share with an insider researcher.

The study shows that although access is predominantly a function of multiple levels of knowing and their affiliated capital, access to information, may also be a consequence of favorable situational factors encountered in the field. Similarly, the study shows the media as a vehicle that insider researchers can use to not only gain access but to engage in public discourse on actionable issues encountered in the field. The study shows that knowledge of researcher is not only gained prior to the study but the media can augment knowingsness even during the research. This demonstrates the power of the media in boosting access during field research.

Mediation of researched issues led to creation of mediated social capital, as the media had the effect of allowing informants to be willing to open up access to the researcher as means of continuing the conversation on the issues the researcher raised in the media. To this end, the media is seen as a vehicle that influences the formation of social relationships and their affiliated social capital, which can then be converted to information access capital. This finding is in line with Geber *et al.*’s (2016) study that shows that “informational media use has positive effects on social capital” (p. 13).

This finding also resonates with Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, although Bourdieu (1997) argues that social capital is accrued through networks formed through personal relationships and membership in various groups that often convey, “credit in [...] various senses of the word” (p. 51). In this case, the media is seen as a platform that boosted formation of social networks formed through mutual interest in mediated issues, which then translated to social capital.

The study showed that friendship is both an enabler and inhibitor of access depending on power dynamics involved in the relational positioning of the researcher and their informant. This is in line with earlier studies that show friendship as an inhibitor to access (Alvesson, 2003; Greene, 2014; Taylor, 2011). Tillmann-Healy (2003),

however, shows friendship as a method that can further access and understanding of the researched by allowing the researcher to “get to know others in meaningful and sustained ways,” aside from “speaking for” or “giving voice” to them (p. 733).

Friendship was seen as enabler of access as it allowed access to in-depth information with friends who were my equals in education and work experience. However, friendship limited access especially with friendships infused with hierarchical power dynamics. Thus, the study shows that power is a major relational dynamic that hinders the effectiveness of friendship as a means of access.

Power was also seen to define the time and place of interviews, where dominant informants choices subdued the choices of the researcher. Hence, even though, Merriam *et al.* (2001) argue for negotiation of power realms during fieldwork, sometimes negotiations are not possible given the dominant positions of powerful informants.

The study demonstrates that ethics of friendship, discretion and anonymity are pertinent ethical terrains to navigate judiciously. For instance, the insider benefit of enriching accounts also came with the ethical requirement of discretion and protection of informant’s identity.

The study further showed that even with a multiple identity positioning the complexity of the institution detracts from the claim of total insider. This reinforces Trowler’s (2011) observation that “insiderness” is not a fixed value but shifts.

### Conclusions and implications

The paper has practical implications for insider researchers as it reveals ways in which they can use multiple levels of being known to gain access. It showed that possession of either or a combination of social, cultural, economic or media capital can afford researchers information access capital. The researcher may not necessarily be a member of the informant’s primary circle of networks, but they could have secondary or tertiary levels of capital gained through informal and formal personal friendships, family relations, membership in groups, institutions or use of media that affords them access.

The study has implications for both stranger and insider researchers seeking access to elite informants in complex organizations. It shows that the complexity of these organizations means that access is not guaranteed and the insider researcher is not a total insider. They have to continually negotiate the continuum of insider-outsider positioning and the challenges and benefits thereof.

In addition, the study shows that stranger researchers may have to invest in building social networks that would afford them a degree of “information access capital.” This could ease the challenges of gaining interview access with largely busy and elusive elite informants.

The study has ethical and power implications for insider researchers, researching higher education contexts. It points out the nuanced challenges they are bound to face during the field research. It shows that they need to continually negotiate and judiciously address moral, ethical and power dilemmas as and when encountered.

### References

- Alvesson, M. (2003), “Methodology for close up studies – struggling with closeness and closure”, *Higher Education*, Vol. 46 No. 2, pp. 167-193.
- Alvesson, M. (2009), “At home ethnography: struggling with closeness and closure”, in Ybema, S., Yanow, D., Wels, H. and Kamsteeg, F. (Eds), *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*, Sage, London, pp. 156-174.

- Brannick, T. and Coghlan, D. (2007), “In defence of being ‘native’: the case for insider academic research”, *Organisational Research Methods*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 59-74.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986), “The forms of capital”, in Richardson, J. (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Greenwood, New York, NY, pp. 241-258.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997), “The forms of capital”, in Halsey, A.H., Lauder, H., Brown, P. and Wells, A.S. (Eds), *Education: Culture, Economy and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 46-58.
- Bourdieu, P. (2012), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Trans by R. Nice), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Carter, J. (2004), “Research notes: reflections on interviewing across the ethnic divide”, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 345-353.
- Chavez, C. (2008), “Conceptualizing from the inside: advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality”, *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 474-494.
- Coleman, J.S. (1988), “Social capital in the creation of human capital”, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, Supplement, pp. S95-S120, available at: [www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/228943](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/228943) (accessed September 6, 2016).
- Dahl, R. (1957), “The concept of power”, *Behavioural Science*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 201-215.
- Ellis, C. (2007), “Telling secrets, revealing lives: relational ethics in research with intimate others”, *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 3-29.
- Ellis, C. and Adams, T.E. (2014), “The purposes, practices and principles of autoethnographic research”, in Leavy, P. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, pp. 254-276.
- Ellis, C. and Bochner, A.P. (2000), “Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: researcher as subject”, in Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 733-768.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T.E. and Bochner, A.P. (2011), “Autoethnography: an overview”, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 1-18.
- Floyd, A. and Arthur, L. (2012), “Researching from within: external and internal ethical engagement”, *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 171-180.
- Geber, S., Scherer, H. and Hefner, D. (2016), “Social capital in media societies: the impact of media use and media structures on social capital”, *The International Communication Gazette*, June, pp. 1-21, available at: <http://gaz.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/06/01/1748048516640211> (accessed September 6, 2016).
- Greene, M.J. (2014), “On the inside looking in: methodological insights and challenges in conducting qualitative insider research”, *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 19 No. 15, pp. 1-13.
- Kasozi, A.B.K. (2003), *University Education in Uganda: Challenges and Opportunities for Reform*, Fountain Publishers, Kampala.
- L’Etang, J. (2014), “Writing PR history: issues, methods and politics”, in St John, B. III, Lamme, M.O. and L’Etang, J. (Eds), *Pathways to Public Relations: Histories of Practice and Profession*, Routledge, London, pp. xviii-xxxviii.
- MacBeth, D. (2001), “On ‘reflexivity’ in qualitative research: two readings and a third”, *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 35-68.
- Merton, R.K. (1972), “Insiders and outsiders: a chapter in the sociology of knowledge”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78 No. 1, pp. 9-47.
- Merriam, S.A., Johnson-Bailey, J., Lee, M.Y., Kee, Y., Ntseane, G. and Muhamad, M. (2001), “Power and positionality: negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures”, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 405-416.



- Natifu, B. (2016), "PR and identity management issues, an autoethnography of a Ugandan University", *Asia-Pacific Public Relations Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 4-22.
- Portes, A. (1998), "Social capital: its origins and applications in modern sociology", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 1-24.
- Putnam, R.D. (1995), "Bowling alone: Americas declining social capital", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 65-78.
- Reed-Danahay, D.E. (1997), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, Berg, Oxford.
- Taylor, J. (2011), "The intimate insider: negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research", *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 3-22.
- Tillmann-Healy, L.M. (2003), "Friendship as method", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 9 No. 5, pp. 729-749.
- Trowler, P. (2011), "Researching your own institution", *British Educational Research Association (BERA)*, 8pp, available at: [www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/researching-your-own-institution-higher-education](http://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/researching-your-own-institution-higher-education); [www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Researching-your-own-institution-Higher-Education.pdf](http://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Researching-your-own-institution-Higher-Education.pdf) (accessed June 24, 2016).
- Wall, S. (2006), "An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 1-12, available at: [https://sites.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5\\_2/PDF/wall.pdf](https://sites.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/PDF/wall.pdf) (accessed September 6, 2016).
- Watson, T.J. (2012), "Making organizational ethnography", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 15-22.
- Weber, M. (1947/1981), "Bureaucracy", in Grusky, O. and Miller, G.A. (Eds), *The Sociology of Organizations: Basic Studies*, 2nd ed., Collier, Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., London, pp. 7-36.
- Weinreb, A.A. (2006), "The limitations of stranger-interviewers in rural Kenya", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 71 No. 6, pp. 1014-1039.
- Wellman, B. and Frank, K. (2001), "Network capital in a multi-level world: getting support from personal communities", in Lin, N., Cook, K. and Burt, R. (Eds), *Social Capital: Theory and Research*, Aldine de Gruyter, Hawthorne, New York, NY, pp. 233-273, available at: <http://groups.chass.utoronto.ca/netlab/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Network-Capital-in-a-Multi-Level-World-Getting-Support-from-Personal-Communities.pdf> (accessed September 6, 2016).
- Wellman, B., Haase, A.Q., Witte, J. and Hampton, K. (2001), "Does the internet increase, decrease or supplement social capital? Social networks, participation and community commitment", *American Behavioural Scientist*, Vol. 45 No. 3, pp. 436-455.

### Further reading

- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992), *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

### Corresponding author

Barbra Natifu can be contacted at: [nbarbran@gmail.com](mailto:nbarbran@gmail.com)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)