

The Inside and The Outside

Identity performance in the context of social research

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Identities are an irrevocable component of social life. They help us better know ourselves and others, enabling communication, mutual understanding, and social cohesion. We assume different identities in our day-to-day lives, performing the 'self' depending on whether we are being observed, and who is observing us. This 'on stage' and 'backstage' behaviour corresponds to public 'outer' and private 'inner' dimensions of self, with the outer self observing the prescribed social norms and behaviour despite what the inner self may think and feel. When two groups interact, alternative realities come face to face, and multiple 'inside' and 'outside' selves emerge, with participants performing the roles they believe fit the context. This article examines this identity performance and the 'inside-outside' positionality in the context of social research. Reflecting on interactions and activities undertaken during a collaborative North-South research module, I posit that research engagements would do well to implement actions that diminish the perceived power distance between the parties involved.

Introduction

The rain was coming down steadily when we received the marriage proposal.

It was November, the short rain season in Nairobi, and I was walking through one of Kawangware's main streets. Ordinarily, nobody would have paid attention to me in such weather, preferring to stay indoors to keep warm, but today it was different. I was walking amongst a cluster of light-skinned people, the majority of whom were women. We were conducting an academic research module, walking the neighbourhood under the guidance of two local community members.

Our group was a little unusual for the time, place and weather. We drew the attention of the locals, and some of them directed various comments at us – welcoming us to Kawangware, asking us where we were from, and

from one of the more cheeky ones, a marriage proposal, aimed in the direction of the lighter-skinned women. Now, if I had been alone, I would have easily dealt with the situation as you learn to in Nairobi – by ignoring them. However, in this context, I felt caught in between different worlds and their corresponding identities. On one hand, I wanted to dissociate from my ‘Kenyan’ identity, as the hecklers were making such a poor show of it. This is not what being Kenyan means, I wanted to say to the visiting students. On the other hand, I also wanted to signal to the hecklers that I was one of them; I, too, was Kenyan. Our guests had been profiled for their complexion, appearance, and the cadence of their walk. It was uncomfortable to be profiled along with them simply because we were walking together. Above everything else I felt a keen sense of responsibility for the safety of the visiting students, being only one of two Kenyan participants in the group. It is important to be constantly aware of your surroundings in Nairobi, especially as a woman, but it seemed vital to be hyper-aware in this context, and I continuously scanned our environment to make sure we all returned to the bus safely at the end of the exercise. This was exhausting, to say the least.

I soon noticed my feelings regarding other module activities with interest. Before our walk through the neighbourhood, we visited our local guide at his home to interview him and his family on their history in the area. In this space, I realised, I had felt responsible for making sure that our guests behaved appropriately within the context of a Kenyan home, internally taking on the role of a leader. I also felt the need to distance myself from the visiting students because some of them were very direct – almost insensitive – in the questions they were asking. Confronted by the discomfort of our hosts, I desired to disown the ‘researcher’ identity I had adopted and take on my ‘Kenyan’ one instead.

As we got deeper into conversation with our hosts, who all along had been very guarded and formal, I noticed them begin to glance at me surreptitiously. They offered us some tea after the main interview session was over, and as we were taking it, our host turned to me and said, “You look like one of ours.” What he meant was that I looked like I came from the same ethnic community he was from. This question, in itself, was not unusual to me. My facial features are somewhat ethnically ambiguous, and I am often met with puzzled looks when introducing myself. What made this particular instance stand out to me was what followed after I answered in the affirmative. He warmed up to me instantly and even began to address me directly when answering questions or volunteering further

information, sometimes in the mother tongue, with the expectation that I would translate to the rest of the group.

Comparing notes with my Kenyan colleagues later, some of them also spoke of feeling responsible for the guests in their group and ill at ease with the home visits. The more I observed the group dynamics, the more I became aware of the discomfort rippling beneath the surface of their experience. It was as if we were actors in a play: playing our roles perfectly on stage, and discussing what we thought of the script, the characters and the audience backstage. I could sense a similar stance in the members of the Kawangware community who hosted us; their outwardly polite and welcoming demeanour may have been satisfactory for our guests, but to me, it seemed that their true thoughts and feelings on the matter were being disclosed privately.

What, then, was this phenomenon I was witnessing, and what did it mean for the work we were carrying out? Why did we all find it necessary to ‘put on an act’? For whom were our chosen identities intended, and what power dynamics did they reflect? And finally, how authentic could the information we were gathering be if we were collectively ‘putting on an act’?

On the presentation of self

Erving Goffman, in his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), likens the presentation of self to a theatrical performance, observing that individuals ‘perform’ their behaviour depending on 1) whether they are being observed, and 2) who is observing them. Our behaviour, when being observed (‘front stage’), is akin to that of actors in a play; adhering to the appropriate social rules and conventions in a bid to project a desirable image. No performance is necessary in a private (‘backstage’) setting, and the ‘actor’ can therefore be more natural and relaxed.

Reading identities in this manner, we may be tempted to ascribe conscious, manipulative motives behind their performance, but this is hardly ever the case. Humans are social beings; since we occupy the same space as others, our existence is marked by an endless stream of individual and social interactions (Alfrey et al., 2023). We derive our beliefs about ourselves and others from these social observations, interactions and experiences, and this, in turn, forms the basis for our identities (Burke & Stets, 2023). Our identities are a critical part of how we relate to and make meaning in

the world. They are the interface through which we communicate to self and other. The way in which we perceive ourselves and others, therefore, determines how we behave and interact with them in different contexts. We tend to make instant judgements about who others are or might be, and calibrate our behaviour to align with our perceptions, adjusting it as we get to know them better.

Because identities are multifaceted, with personal, social, and cultural components (Spreckels & Kothoff, 2007; Yep, 2002), they are dynamic, continually changing through different contexts, spaces and time (Burke & Stets, 2023). To be human, therefore, is to constantly juggle different sets of identities in time and space. We use identities to express who we believe ourselves to be, the social groups we want to be associated with, and our 'ways of being' that are based on socially constructed categories such as gender, ethnicity and social class. To express our identities we employ a wide range of gestures and props, such as starting a gathering with prayer, prominently displaying a flat-screen TV in the living room, streaming gospel music directly from YouTube, and serving milky tea with jam or Blueband-layered sandwiches. These examples typically signal a generous, morally upright, middle-class, Christian Kenyan family.

The theatrical metaphor for self-presentation implies the existence of private 'inner' and public 'outer' dimensions. We do not have to look too far to see this concept in practice. When we are born into the community we are named by others; as we grow, we take on more responsibility for naming ourselves and guiding others in how they are to name us (Wilshire, 1982). We learn, while quite young, to mask our true thoughts and feelings in favour of what the adults say is right; and as we grow up, show up more and more as our 'outside' selves, observing the prescribed norms and conventions outwardly despite our natural inclinations.

When we reach adulthood, the power difference between us and other adults shrinks, and we suddenly discover that we can express more of our 'inside' selves without any significant repercussions. This brings me to the point that I want to make here: our natural tendency to calibrate ourselves to what we believe is expected of us in specific cultural contexts is tempered when we are in the presence of those we believe to be like us or on the same 'level' as us. I do not need to perform for the people in my day-to-day life – given our similar backgrounds, we are both on the 'inside' of the culture and can perfectly understand each other's spoken and unspoken cues. In interacting with those located 'outside' my culture,

however, we are operating from different sets of references; I must play the role that I believe best suits the situation. This may result in misunderstandings, or, at the very least, an inability to access the authentic thoughts and feelings of the other party.

The need to perform a ‘prescribed’ identity grows even greater in the presence of those we perceive to have power over us or some aspect of our lives. Power, in this case, may be defined as the extent to which one can mobilise and dominate means and resources, and use this capability to influence or impose one’s will over others (Tobore, 2023). Having power over others implies psychological, economic, or cultural distance from them, reinforcing the position of being ‘outside’ the group you exercise power over. As alternative ‘realities’ come face to face with each other during cultural interactions, the result is decided by the relative material power of the groups involved, with the ‘dependent’ group experiencing itself as the ‘object’ of outsider scrutiny, control, and sometimes, disdain (Greenwood, 1982). This subject-object dynamic is often enacted in academic research, where increasing North-South collaborations replicate asymmetrical power relations by benefiting the Northern partner more than the Southern one (Choquez-Millan et al., 2024).

It is important to note that while the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ dimensions of self are handy categories for delineating our lived experience, they cannot truly be separated. Identity involves the mediation of each dimension through the other (Wilshire, 1982). One cannot come to any real knowledge of self by meditating in the forest, alone; to do so necessarily requires interactions with others. Similarly, it can be difficult to know others without knowing oneself; as doing so requires one to imagine oneself in the other’s shoes, and use their internal reactions as a starting point for what the other may think and feel.

Conducting the research

Our research module brought thirty-six participants from three academic institutions in Nairobi, Mumbai and New York together under three respective instructors to utilise Dagoretti’s built environment as a basis for inquiry into current and historical social, cultural and political systems. The programme ran for one week and consisted of interactions with individuals and communities within and around Kawangware. We adopted an ethnographic approach, using the methods of walking the neighbourhood, observation, and in-person unstructured interviews. Data

were documented through field notes and photography and verified by comparing our findings to those of the other groups. The fieldwork was complemented by visits to museums, galleries, institutions and green spaces within and around Nairobi.



Experiencing the inside
Inside Mr. M's house during the Dagoretti research

Identity performance in social research

Unlike the visiting participants, who were full-time students and lecturers at their respective institutions, and had taken time off to travel to Kenya for this experience, the Kenyan participants remained rooted in their day-to-day lives, juggling work and family responsibilities alongside the research. We were commuting to and from our homes, which are not all located within the city. This made it difficult to attend all the scheduled site visits, especially since quite a number of them were located in far-flung areas of the city, and either started very early or ended quite late. Navigating these challenges, imagine my surprise one day when one of our guest facilitators made a quip about my having showed up 'just in time' for lunch. I had been detained on work duties in the morning and had only managed to join the group for the afternoon discussion session. Naturally, I smiled pleasantly and reassured them I was only there to attend the group discussion; the fact that I had arrived just in time for lunch was a mere

coincidence. I might have ignored this interaction had the individual in question not made similar comments to other Kenyan participants on separate occasions. On paying closer attention, I wondered, had the individual in question had assumed the (superior) identity of the ‘benefactor’ and cast the Kenyan participants in the (inferior) identity of the ‘beneficiaries’ of the funding that had facilitated the module?

Goffmann (1956) contends that individuals both ‘give’ and ‘give off’ expressions; the former communicating the intended message to the audience, and the latter conveying unintended impressions. The individual in question may have been aiming to reprimand me for my perceived lack of professionalism, but what they did instead, by making their comment about food, was to erode whatever trust and moral authority they possessed and increase the distance between us. How could they be trusted to see any of us (Kenyans) or our experiences clearly, if they assumed that the reason we were taking part was for the free meals? Moreover, in many cultures, meals are considered a basic component of all gatherings: the ritual of eating together creates room for conversations that nurture relationships, trust, belonging and togetherness among partakers (Rokach, 2020). To treat shared meals as a favour to the ‘other’ party is to impoverish the relational experience and block oneself from an invaluable opportunity to truly know the other.

On the inside and the outside

There are many potential reasons why the individual in question may have felt the need to comment as they did. I may never find out why, as our paths are unlikely to cross in the future. Legitimate reasons or not, what was never in doubt throughout the whole experience was their perceived (superior) position as the academic ‘expert’, and my perceived (inferior) position as a mere ‘local student’. This power distance may not have been the cause of the misunderstanding, but it certainly did nothing for the authenticity of the interaction between us.

As social researchers, we are often encouraged to maintain our distance from the subject or phenomenon we are studying in an attempt to preserve objectivity and reach a ‘scientific’ conclusion. But how objective can we truly be when we come to the work from an outsider's perspective? Operating on this level, we only have access to pre-conceived notions and ideas about the ‘Other’, and this is all we can bring to our work. On this level we can only access a set of staged identities, and, having no

alternative, try our best to make our data fit pre-determined categories and universal theories. This limits our ability to perceive the reality.

The greater the distance there is between the researcher and the subject, the more unlikely they are to see the whole picture. My delicate 'inside' position in the home we visited in Kawangware may have been compounded when the family recognised me as 'one of their own' – if I had been bound by convention before, I was even more securely bound now, as my behaviour was now going to be held to a higher standard. But this also established a higher level of trust between me and the family, and, I would argue, positioned me closer to the truth than anyone else in that room. This does not mean that we can only research those who are like us, or come from the same background as us. In truth, we can never truly know what it is to be the other, for we do not live life as them. The reality of what it means to live, or have lived, in Dagoretti, can only be seen from within. I may have empathised more easily with the community than our visiting students did, but could not possibly stake a claim to the 'Dagoretti' experience without participating in it myself.

I merely use this example to illustrate the point that researchers must strive to be aware of the distance between them and their (human) subjects, designating research methodologies that shrink this distance down as much as possible to enable them to get to the truth. Participating in the culture, and studying it from the inside, by no means taints the study with subjectivity: empathy and rationality can co-exist. Participating from within reduces the need for staged performances of identity and increases the probability that the researcher will pierce into a reality that is untainted by externally imposed assumptions.

How can we cut through the staged identities that typically feature in such collaborative research projects, in the absence of the time and effort that complete immersion would require?

Scheduling unstructured time around planned activities might be a good start. The most organic reflections and exchanges between group members mostly took place in the liminal spaces – during transits from one venue to another, and over shared meals. The visiting students may have had more of this unstructured time together, as they were sharing accommodation, but this arrangement limited the amount of interaction they had with the Kenyan participants and the lived Kenyan experience. It may not have been possible to eliminate the distance between us and the guests within one week, but it was certainly possible to reduce it.

Perhaps uncoupling social research from conventional forms of academic research outputs might also make a difference. After all, it is not the mere commercialisation or the assignment of market value to academic research that generates an undesirable effect, but the prioritisation of this economic value over other forms of value such as use value. This conventional approach predisposes researchers to remain on the outside looking in, as a significant proportion of their conclusions have to be in line with dominant concepts and theories for them to be published and receive the ‘proper’ accolades from leading academic institutions. We might want to look into alternative ways of disseminating knowledge, ones that are accessible to members of the community that our research is based on. A collaborative event hosted by the community, for example, might have given the visiting participants a more palpable sense of lived Kenyan culture than a series of museum visits.

Building such spaces of common ground in North-South collaborations might help to soften the rigid hierarchical notions that characterise such engagements. It is nearly impossible to participate in a culture and retain illusions of superiority or inferiority to the other. To project certain identities in the hope that the more resourced party might bestow some resources on the less resourced one is just as extractive as expecting the less resourced party to behave in certain ways to justify the endowment of resources upon them. Both diminish the Other’s humanity and reduce them to a commodity.

Whatever strategies they choose, researchers must adopt a posture of courage and willingness to go off the beaten path, subjecting themselves to new and unknown environments, and softening closely held certainties about identities – both their own and those of others. Applying this lens to their work, they can go beyond the surface level and see to creating real value for their communities and beyond.

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