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Navigating Credibility and Approachability in Conflict Zones: Insights from Fieldwork in Nigerian Communities Facing Eco-Violence

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Abstract

This article contributes to the literature by proposing an expanded "framework for credibility and approachability," extending the framework's applicability in conflict-affected societies. The credibility and approachability framework aids researchers in comprehending and evaluating their fieldwork experiences, enabling them to articulate their experiences clearly and insightfully. Drawing on the reflexive experiences of a diaspora-based researcher who used this framework to prepare for fieldwork in Nigeria, the article illustrates the framework's components plus the added "bearability" component. The experiences were borne out of a study with 54 participants across focus groups in communities affected by eco-violence in the Nigerian Middle Belt. The researcher's positionality of "betweenness" is also discussed, highlighting the complexities of conducting research as an academic "homecomer" in communities located in conflict-affected areas.

Keywords

fieldwork, credibility and approachability framework, bearability, eco-violence, insider/outsider

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Navigating Credibility and Approachability in Conflict Zones: Insights from Fieldwork in Nigerian Communities Facing Eco-Violence

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This article contributes to the literature by proposing an expanded "framework for credibility and approachability," extending the framework's applicability in conflict-affected societies. The credibility and approachability framework aids researchers in comprehending and evaluating their fieldwork experiences, enabling them to articulate their experiences clearly and insightfully. Drawing on the reflexive experiences of a diaspora-based researcher who used this framework to prepare for fieldwork in Nigeria, the article illustrates the framework's components plus the added "bearability" component. The experiences were borne out of a study with 54 participants across focus groups in communities affected by eco-violence in the Nigerian Middle Belt. The researcher's positionality of "betweenness" is also discussed, highlighting the complexities of conducting research as an academic "homecomer" in communities located in conflict-affected areas.

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Introduction

I was exhausted when I arrived in Makurdi, Benue State's capital, on 29 April 2022, having left London two days earlier for Abuja and then taking a domestic flight to Enugu, from where I boarded a bus to Makurdi. Given the rampant kidnappings at the time, I opted for a safer but longer travel route to Makurdi, flying to Enugu and then taking a seven-hour bus ride on rough roads. I stayed in an affordable hotel outside the city, which served as my base. Reports of escalating violence in Benue state, including a recent incident where 22 people were killed (Duru, 2022), heightened my fear and exhaustion. The ensuing apprehension dampened my enthusiasm, which had already been diminished by reports of escalating violence within the state. However, given the importance of the trip to my doctoral studies, I decided to take a risk and proceed with the proposal.

Data collection from hard-to-reach communities presents challenges for researchers due to difficulties in identifying, sampling, finding, persuading, and interviewing these populations (Adhikari & Bryant, 2015; Tourangeau, 2014). The ongoing violence categorized respondents in the study areas as such populations. While recent vulnerabilities like the Covid-19 pandemic have highlighted the potential of remote platforms for research (Heywood et al., 2022; Perera, 2017), over-reliance on these platforms can skew findings and amplify elite interests over disadvantaged voices (Perera, 2017). The pandemic and global lockdown further complicated this fieldwork, which required in-person interviews for effectiveness. To effectively prepare for my fieldwork, I sought frameworks that could offer insights into data

collection in conflict-affected communities. Unfortunately, there was limited information available based on experiential encounters. However, I came across the "credibility and approachability framework," which was insightful. The credibility and approachability framework aids researchers in comprehending and evaluating their fieldwork experiences, ultimately enabling them to effectively articulate and elucidate their experiences in a clear and illuminating manner (Leigh et al., 2021; Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017) The existing credibility and approachability framework has two components: credibility and approachability. Credibility refers to the researchers' performances to influence the researched to think positively of them, whereas approachability refers to the researchers' efforts to be perceived as non-threatening and safe by the researched (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017).

Many scholars have adopted and deployed credibility and approachability frameworks (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017) in fieldwork, most of them being Ph.D. researchers either from the Global South or working in communities in the Global South. Harrigan (2023, p. 670), "a black American woman from an Ivy League university," drew insights from this framework to conduct research in rural communities in Kenya. Similarly, Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020), both scholars born in Ghana who pursued education abroad, utilised this framework for research in communities in Ghana and Malawi. Lokot (2022, p. 9), who describes herself as, "... an Australian citizen with ethnic origins in Sri Lanka—and therefore brown skin ...," also draws from this framework to navigate her positionalities while conducting research among Syrian refugees in Jordan. This framework is particularly beneficial for researchers from the Global South or those intending to work there; however, most of these studies were conducted in environments without ongoing violent conflicts.

As a diaspora-based researcher travelling into the Nigerian Middle Belt, which is the epicentre of the clashes between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers over land and other agricultural resources (Olumba et al., 2022), it was vital to evaluate "getting in" and "getting along" (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017) and safety choices. This prompted me to ask: how can I approach the study site and perform the task without jeopardising my safety? In terms of advice on topics such as access and social norms, among others, the books and other articles on positionality and getting along in the field for students are lacking (Vlavonou, 2023, p. 3), and even when such data collection is complete, researchers find it difficult to describe the difficulties they faced when acquiring and analysing data, or how they arrive at answers to these problems (Maphosa, 2013, p. 91).

Despite the lack of a universally applicable guide for conducting research in such environments (Barakat et al., 2002), and the potential outdated advice from "ethical committees," researchers must still devise practical methods. In this article, I discuss my experiences and positionalities as a foreign-based doctoral researcher who lived in southeast Nigeria before moving abroad and am now conducting research in conflict-affected communities within Nigeria's Middle Belt.

Migration studies often overlook the experiences of those who remain in conflict-affected communities, which deserves more attention (Bogdan, 2024; Erdal et al., 2023; Hagen-zanker et al., 2024). While forced displacement receives huge attention, 'stayees,' or those who stay put, are overlooked due to political reasons (Biehler, 2023, p. 7). In addition, the inherent risks and insecurity researchers face in conflict-affected areas also deter studies from being conducted in such locations (Biehler, 2023; Olumba, 2024a). Despite the potential challenges, studies conducted in conflict-affected zones proffer significant contributions to knowledge and practice, as well as support researchers' career capital (see Adhikari, 2013; Agbiboa, 2022; Voyvodic, 2024). In this article, I offer experiential knowledge and replicable ideas to support research in conflict-affected communities, such as those in the Middle Belt. Most importantly, this article contributes to the literature by complementing the credibility and

approachability framework, which offers insights on "getting in" and "getting along" (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017) during fieldwork, with a bearability component that underscores the importance of addressing security and safety issues. "Bearability" refers to how a researcher perceives and evaluates the general tolerability, accessibility, and safety of a study location and its inhabitants. The bearability level of a study location indicates the outcome of this exercise. In addition, this article complements the work of Adebayo and Njoku (2023) and Oriola and Haggerty (2012).

The article proceeds by outlining a brief context for the research location and the researcher. It then describes the current components of the framework for credibility and approachability, emphasising the necessity for them to integrate the bearability component. Then follows the presentation of the updated version of the framework of credibility and approachability, which incorporates the component of bearability. The article concludes by discussing the insights to consider when preparing and conducting research in a conflict-affected community.

Voices from the Shadows: A Journey to the "Invisibles" in the Middle Belt

In Nigeria, there has been an ongoing violent conflict between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers, but the severity and viciousness of these violent conflicts in the Middle Belt are overwhelming (Akingbe, 2022, p. 19; Olumba, 2024c; Tuki, 2023). The ongoing violent conflicts in the rural communities of the Middle Belt have made it one of the most volatile and violent regions in Nigeria, where tens of thousands of people have been killed and several communities destroyed (Nwankwo, 2023; Olumba, 2024b). The region also has the highest rates of internal displacement in Nigeria, with over four hundred thousand people displaced in Benue State alone (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022).

Almost weekly, massacres and destructions are reported in the news, further depicting these communities as hopelessly "killing fields." In Nigeria, the severity and barbarity of the violence, along with the vast number of fatalities and destruction, have led top media houses to refer to the rural communities in the Middle Belt, particularly Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau States, as "killing fields" (Adebowale, 2023; Ahovi et al., 2023; Charles, 2022; Ndujihe, 2024). The killing of 22 people on 21 April 2022, in Kwande and Gwer West Local Government Areas of Benue State is one of many such killings that happen weekly. For illustration, between March and June 12, 2022, the attacks in the rural communities of Benue State resulted in the deaths of 92 people (Charles, 2022).

Between February 25th and March 11th, more than 400 farmers lost their lives in communities in Benue State (Charles, 2022; Duru, 2023; Ewokor, 2023). What is now called the "The Good Friday massacre" occurred on Good Friday of Easter 2023, resulting in the deaths of several people in various communities within Benue State. According to Charles (2023), in the Guma Local Government Area, 38 internally displaced persons (IDPs) were among the victims killed at the Local Government Education Authority Primary School in Mgban, on Good Friday; these individuals had been forced to flee their communities due to the persistent conflict between farmers and nomadic herders. According to Ndujihe (2024), between May 2023 and March 2024, a period of 10 months, 6,931 people have been killed in the "killing fields."

Unlike other social science researchers who prefer conducting research in IDP or refugee camps, often overlooking those displaced individuals not residing in such designated areas (Bakewell, 2008; Chatty & Marfleet, 2013), my project focused on community members living in conflict-affected villages. These individuals are often regarded as the 'invisibles' in the literature (Lubkemann, 2008; Regasa & Lietaert, 2022).

These conflicts between the Fulani herders and sedentary farmers, known as "eco-violence" (Olumba et al., 2022), are ongoing in many rural communities within the Sahel region. There are several direct and indirect causes at the heart of these disputes. Still, the most prominent competing variables are the two groups' struggles for access to and control of water, land, and other agricultural resources and inactions from the government (Ojo, 2023; Olumba, 2024b), as well as collective memories influencing violent collective behaviour in contemporary times (Olumba, 2023) and issues of indigeneity (Higazi, 2016; Nwankwo, 2024). Thus, it was challenging and dangerous to undertake the fieldwork.

My research focuses on understanding the lifeworlds of sedentary farmers who practice rain-fed agriculture and choose voluntary immobility as they resist displacement in conflict-affected communities without the assistance of the government. I did not connect with or encounter nomadic Fulani herders because my research was focused on sedentary farmers who chose voluntary immobility.

The study involved 54 respondents who participated in five focus group discussion (FGD) and a mini-focus group with the "Youths."[1] Four FGDs and a mini-focus group were held in O community[2], which is a community in the Agatu Local Government Area of Benue State, whose members chose to stay despite the violent conflict and serve as a host community for others who fled from other areas. The FGDs comprised community members who chose to stay and displaced people living within the community, with separate FGD sessions conducted for men and women. The remaining FGDs were held with men in a community in the Nasarawa-Eggon Local Government Area in Nasarawa State, whose members were entirely displaced, but had to fight to return to their community after a couple of years of living in displacement. The FGDs consisted of adult men and women, mainly farmers with basic primary school education or none.

Positionality of Researcher

Even though I possessed positive characteristics, the fact that I was a non-native conducting research in a rural area exacerbated my apprehension. My positionality as a researcher in the field was impacted by how respondents saw me and my background as an Igbo man and a diaspora-based Ph.D. researcher. Being from the south-eastern region of Nigeria, a region populated primarily by the Igbo people, I was neither perceived as an adversary nor a local by respondents in Benue and Nasarawa States. However, the fact that they recognised me as a Nigerian made it simpler for them to accommodate me, and my experiential knowledge assisted me in navigating the dynamics of the fieldwork locations. My position as a doctorate scholar at the University of London boosted my reputation among them and opened doors to certain data that would have otherwise been closed. As a man, they granted me access that they would have refused to a woman owing to Nigeria's prevalent discriminatory cultural norms.

Comprehending the researcher's positionality in relation to the people or issues studied is vital for the research process (Campbell et al., 2021; Lahman et al., 2011). I tried to be socially conscious and reflexive about how my ideas and experiences affect knowledge co-construction (Rodriguez et al., 2011) even though the circumstances at times were complex. In conflict-affected areas where all interactions are based on violence, the researcher and the people being studied may face complicated power dynamics (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p. 1013). Such dynamics may alter existing notions of power relations between the

[1]The term "Youths" is used among the community members in the study locations to describe mostly their young men who act as vigilantes by using firearms to guard and protect their community from armed external aggression.
[2]For security purposes and to minimize potential risks, the study locations have been anonymized as "O community," situated in the Agatu Local Government area of Benue State.

researched and the researcher, resulting in a situation in which respondents can have multiple and fluid positionalities while conducting research in a post-conflict zone, even to the point of exerting control over the researcher and research process (Schulz, 2021).

As a southeastern Nigerian man and a doctoral researcher in London, conducting research in Nigeria's conflict-ridden Middle Belt challenged my classification as an insider or outsider. My inability to speak and understand the local Agatu language hindered me from accessing several women who came to see me before our arrival but could not speak pidgin English. Overcoming these and other challenges would have enriched the data I collected. Nonetheless, it was a fruitful endeavour, as data collection in ongoing conflict locations is still rarely done.

Researchers' positionalities often lean towards one or the other, but exposure to literature and other factors can blur these lines (Dwyer & Buckle, 2018). Kerr and Sturm (2019) argue that a researcher's positionality is never entirely insider or outsider but rather a reflective perspective with partially shared understandings of the studied phenomena. Vlavonou (2023, p. 6) further posits that being both an insider and outsider simultaneously is conceptually limited. Positionalities are temporal, relational, and socially constructed, allowing researchers to embody both roles due to intertwined positionalities (Pustulka et al., 2019, pp. 242–243). Thus, my positionality aligns with McFarlane-Morris's (2020) "betweenness" concept, where I fluidly moved between insider and outsider roles during my research, which arises when researchers based abroad study their home country.

The experiential learning reflections in subsequent sections that depict my experiences in the field, both my positionalities and those attributed to me or perceived by the respondents, are wrapped around the credibility and approachability frameworks.

Credibility and Approachability Framework (Extant)

The credibility and approachability framework was initially conceptualised as performance-based activities by Lofland et al. (2006). This description overlooks the fact that credibility and approachability are also categories that the researched imposes on the researcher (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). Thus, Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017) went ahead to expand the framework:

> … by conceptualizing credibility and approachability as both performed behaviors *and* perceived characteristics, we are able to incorporate the researcher's positionality, the stand-point of the researched, and the power-laden particularities of the interaction (for example, local structures of domination) in our data analyses and fieldwork reflections. (p. 380, italics added)

Thus, Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017) contributed to the literature by conceptualising the credibility and approachability framework as more than just a framework based on the researcher's performed behaviours; they argued that it also includes respondents' perceptions of the researcher. This addition to the framework allows for the incorporation of the researcher's positionality, the views of the respondents, and the details of the power interaction into data analysis and fieldwork reflections (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017).

Table 1
Operationalization of Credibility and Approachability

Credibility: Researcher is a worthwhile investment of time		**Approachability**: Researcher is nonthreatening and safe	
Performed	*Perceived*	*Performed*	*Perceived*
• **Cultural Credibility**	• **Vouched for by key informants** • **Hierarchical differentiation**	• **Acceptable incompetent** • **Critical Accommodation**	• **Comrade** • **Intrigue Factor** • **Easy to talk to** • **Acceptable incompetent**

Note. Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017)

Researchers are increasingly using the "credibility and approachability framework" (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Fort, 2022; Lokot, 2022) to describe and analyse fieldwork experiences, primarily how researchers dealt with concerns such as race, ethnicity, identity, age, cultural and traditional norms, benefits, and other elements unique to the fieldwork setting. Beyond these studies, many more have adopted the approaches of the credibility and approachability framework without explicitly acknowledging such. For instance, while conducting an elite interview in China, the first author of a group of researchers had to demonstrate (perform) credibility by "self-promoting" in order to convey credibility to the respondents and get their attention by using academic qualifications and characteristics associated with 'top-ranking' universities (Li et al., 2021, p. 10).

Researchers' identities, positions, and behaviours impact how access is gained and maintained in the field, and access to data is dependent on how researchers engage with gatekeepers (Ferdoush, 2020; Vlavonou, 2023); hence, the researchers' performances are essential to the success of the data gathering activity (Leigh et al., 2021, p. 1081). Thus, this framework helps create a narrative on how researchers' identities, positionalities and behaviours together with that of the gatekeeper's shape access to the site, data collection and the rest of the research process.

Credibility in research refers to how researchers' performances are perceived by respondents, influencing their willingness to participate, and Approachability, on the other hand, involves being seen as non-threatening and safe, encompassing physical and emotional safety and impartiality (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017, pp. 380–381). However, the credibility and approachability framework does not address researchers' environmental safety concerns. This gap necessitates an analytical tool to ensure the study site poses no risk to researchers because, according to (Kuiper, 2021), what constitutes a risk relates to structural positions, spatial context, and varying levels of possible exposure.

This article expands the framework by including a component for assessing the safety, tolerability, and accessibility of the research site, thus adapting the framework to specific contexts. This has been done before. Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020) expanded the credibility and approachability framework based on their fieldwork in Ghana and Malawi, introducing roles such as professional academic credibility, selective competence, eager learner, and nonthreatening demeanour. The framework's cultural credibility component encompasses all credibility types, including academic, trade, traditional, and popular culture (see Table 1). Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017, p. 389) illustrate the "acceptable incompetent" researcher role in the approachability category as someone eager to learn from residents.

Research in conflict zones or areas with intermittent violence can jeopardise researchers' safety without proper precautions (Sangaré & Bleck, 2020; Schulz, 2021). Based on my experience in the Nigerian Middle Belt, assessing the study site's accessibility,

tolerability, and safety was crucial for researcher safety and effective data collection; adding a conceptual tool for these assessments to the credibility and approachability framework led to the inclusion of "bearability."

Adding "bearability" characteristics of the fieldwork region to the credibility and approachability framework is reasonable and necessary. This includes the researcher's positionality, respondents' perspectives, and power interaction specifics, as these factors can influence data analysis and fieldwork reflections (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017, pp. 380–381). The context of assessing the study location's bearability can similarly impact data analysis and fieldwork reflections. "Bearability" refers to how a researcher analyses and perceives a study location's general tolerability, accessibility, and safety, as well as how the gatekeepers of the research site "*performed"* these characteristics to the researcher.

Credibility and Approachability Framework (Modified)

Due to the continuous fighting in the study locations, which creates a volatile and insecure atmosphere, establishing a safe environment where I could engage with the respondents was essential. The measures I adopted, drawing from the three components of the framework (Credibility, Approachability, and Bearability), are stated in the following segment.

Table 2
Operationalization of the Modified Credibility and Approachability

Credibility: Researcher is a worthwhile investment of time.		**Approachability**: Researcher is nonthreatening and safe.		**Bearability**: The research site is accessible and safe.	
Performed	*Perceived*	*Performed*	*Perceived*	*Performed*	*Perceived*
• Cultural Credibility	• Vouched for by key informants • Hierarchical differentiation	• Acceptable incompetent • Critical Accommodation	• Comrade • Intrigue Factor • Easy to talk to • Acceptable incompetent	• Vouched for by key gatekeepers • invisibility by researcher	• Tolerability • Accessibility • Safety

Notes. Adapted from Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017). The author incorporated the bearability component into this framework.

In Table 2, there are three components of the framework, unlike in Table 1, which has only two. Within the Credibility component, there is "cultural credibility," which the researcher must perform to endear themselves to the respondents and others in the study locations. This "performance" entails being sensitive to cultural values and norms, adhering to them, and showcasing cultural competence when necessary.

Additionally, within the Credibility component, the researcher must be vouched for by key informants or gatekeepers familiar with the respondents and locations. These measures enhance the researcher's credibility, so respondents view the researcher as worth their time and views (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). The Approachability component has two aspects. First, the researcher must perform actions that make them more acceptable and approachable. Second, the researcher must be perceived as a "comrade," easy to talk to, and non-threatening by respondents and others within the study location (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017).

There is the Bearability component, which involves actions by both the researcher and the key gatekeepers; it involves the researcher carrying out some performances like making themselves inconspicuous within the locations and avoiding carrying or doing anything that would attract unnecessary attention. The gatekeepers must assure the researcher that all necessary safety measures have been taken and that they will be actively involved in sustaining

this performance. Additionally, the researcher must perceive and ensure that the location is physically tolerable and that their safety is not at risk. The essence of the bearability framework is for the researcher to ensure that the study location is accessible and safe.

I made concerted attempts to perform "credibility" and "approachability" in the study locations. In addition, I endeavoured to ascertain (perceive) the "bearability" level of the research location, and the community's gatekeepers strived to showcase (perform) the community's bearability level as being safe, tolerable and accessible to the researcher.

Credibility

In part, creating credibility with the respondents in the O community was not difficult since I established my credibility by showcasing my academic and traditional cultures, demonstrating my familiarity with the respondents and expertise in the subject area, culminating in their trust, acceptance, and candour.

Using my identity as a doctoral researcher and my affiliation with Royal Holloway, University of London, I made persistent efforts to establish my credibility as a competent researcher from the UK. I simply referenced the University of London, which made it simpler for the respondents to comprehend. The academic cultures I represent – being a doctoral researcher at the University of London – were essential when establishing first contact with local chiefs and their gatekeepers, boosting my acceptance and credibility among respondents. The residents of these rural communities rely heavily on the gatekeepers, which may be enlightened youth and women leaders and their chiefs, to comprehend most issues they are unfamiliar with or lack the competence to grasp. These community gatekeepers provided me with substantial "credibility capital," allowing me to establish myself as deserving of the time, trust, and attention of respondents required for their participation in the focus group.

As a researcher from the southeast and not from the Middle Belt, this positionality casts me as an outsider researcher. However, I am not wholly an outsider researcher because of my Nigerian upbringing and ability to speak pidgin English. Because I am fluent in pidgin English, which was the language of conversation throughout the FGD sessions, it enabled me to "perform" my credibility and establish the familiarity necessary for the study's success. Since I desired control over the data from the point of collection to its analysis, these attributes were vital to me beyond the need to perform "credibility" and "approachability."

I resorted to performing my traditional cultures to also earn credibility. As a result, my several positionalities were transitory and socially constructed, fluctuating based on the circumstances (Hou & Feng, 2019, p. 10; Pustulka et al., 2019, pp. 242–243). I learned to utter a few phrases in the local languages and bowed while meeting the elders to create familiarity and respect for their culture; this was well received by the respondents, who appreciated it. In Africa, norms of seniority and hierarchy are often encountered during research, and one has to adhere accordingly (Vlavonou, 2023). I was always keen to exhibit such credibility-enhancing behaviours. As someone who grew up in Nigeria, I demonstrated my experiential knowledge of appropriate social norms and etiquette; I continually reaffirmed my identity to sustain my credibility and acceptance.

Due to gender disparity fostered by sociocultural norms and religious circumstances, a man will have an easier time than a woman convincing the leaders of such communities to support my work. During fieldwork, the researcher's gender identification, body, language, nationality, or "race" may affect how they are perceived and accepted by the research participants (Ferdoush, 2020; Hordge-Freeman, 2018; Vlavonou, 2023). Access to and the possibility for conducting and organising interviews are mediated by language, particularly among the elites (Vlavonou, 2023). "My body was an essential part of my research instrument in part because it functioned as a stimulus for social interactions" and ultimately affected my

credibility and approachability and how respondents perceive me (Hordge-Freeman, 2018, p. 5). During one of the focus group discussions, I encountered a challenge in accessing sensitive information, such as the types of weapons used to fend off armed attackers. My initial persistence in obtaining this information slowed down the discussion. I recommend avoiding seeking such data in open sessions but sourced privately. Because of my gender as a man, and after consultations with the gatekeepers, I gained access to a select group of people within the community who were able to discuss sensitive questions about purchasing and using weapons.

Local power dynamics can influence respondents' perception of a researcher's credibility and their willingness to participate in data collection (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017; Vlavonou, 2023). In my experience, leveraging local contacts to enhance my reputation with community leaders and gatekeepers was crucial. This strategy earned me credibility, ensured my safety, and facilitated focus group participation. The endorsement from community leaders, whom community members trust, was instrumental in establishing my credibility (see Table 2).

Approachability

Approachability was crucial – the extent to which the researcher is perceived to be harmless (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017, p. 381). I performed it and could see certain respondents' behaviours that supported the notion that they saw me as friendly. Throughout the research, I emphasised my identity as an Igbo man from southeast Nigeria. Many members of the ethnic groups in the Middle Belt believe that they share a similar affinity with the Igbos in Nigeria in terms of being Christians (which the majority are), having similar socio-cultural and traditional systems, and the belief that both groups are marginalised. These characteristics made them perceive me as a "comrade" instead of an adversary – see Table 2. If I were to be from the Fulani, Hausa, or Yoruba ethnic groups, the situation would be very different, as most of these ethnic groups are Muslims, and many people in the Middle Belt consider Muslims to be directly or indirectly responsible for their troubles. Thus, I appeared non-threatening to the responders, who had faith in my impartiality in conveying their experiences, enhancing their good perception of me.

My status as a diaspora doctoral student and my affiliation with a London institution helped me establish credibility and approachability among respondents. These traits reassured the respondents that I was not a member of the Nigerian government, a spy, or one of their supposed rivals, but rather a researcher who would objectively represent and reproduce their narratives. I also demonstrated approachability by refraining from contradicting participants' viewpoints and not pressing them to discuss topics they were uncomfortable with, for instance, their weaponry. After noticing their reluctance, I explored different techniques to comprehend such issues better. This behaviour reassured the respondents that I was harmless and trustworthy. I conducted a mini-focus group with only their "Youths" participating, providing me with valuable information about their weapons acquisition and their experiences in violent situations.

By offering me food and gifts and welcoming me into the palace of their chiefs, it was clear that they perceived me as approachable, and I demonstrated approachability (critical accommodation) by accepting their food and gifts. Such receptions were typically reserved for their most credible guests.

While it is ethically expected that researchers do not accept or offer gifts to avoid potential biases, the contextual realities within the study area and the crucial task of not offending community members while maintaining rapport as a "comrade" led me to accept those gifts. This decision presented an ethical dilemma. On one hand, there is the imperative to remain "credible" and "approachable" and to stay in the good graces of the community

members. On the other hand, there is the obligation to adhere to ethical standards. Despite these challenges, I was steadfast in ensuring that any gifts offered did not influence my research in any way. I urge researchers working in conflict-affected communities to deeply reflect on how accepting or declining gifts might impact their relationship with respondents, their safety, and the research and to ensure that they uphold the integrity of the research while being sensitive and respectful to the cultural norms of those in the study locations.

Occasionally, respondents assign specific roles to the researcher that might be intentionally upheld to facilitate the study (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). For instance, my identity as an Igbo man, presumed to be Christian, was viewed as a characteristic that made me relatable and easy to converse with. They frequently emphasised the positive aspect of me being from the southeast of Nigeria, not from areas where their adversaries resided or originated. As a result, they perceived me as trustworthy and reliable and had confidence in my impartiality when conveying their experiences.

Bearability

Understanding the security condition of the fieldwork area prior to arrival and ways to overcome adversity could enhance a researcher's view of the location's tolerability, safety, and accessibility for research – "the bearability level."

When the backdrop of ongoing eco-violence is considered, it would be impossible to conduct the study if the community's gatekeepers did not vouch that their community is safe, tolerable and accessible. Thus, it is essential to assess the "bearability level" of the research location before starting on a journey to a region experiencing ongoing or sporadic violent conflicts. This performance by the gatekeepers must extend beyond assurances to being actively sustained while the researcher is in the field. The researcher should cultivate social relations that would be maintained even after the end of the fieldwork and explicitly assure the gatekeepers of these long-term connections.

Being inconspicuous within the study locations and avoiding actions that attract unnecessary attention are essential for the researcher's safety. The researcher must take steps to maintain the already established level of tolerability at the study site by, among other things, blending in with the environment through their attire, haircut, and jewellery – to "perform" approachability and enhance safety. These measures include wearing clothing like the locals, avoiding flashy items and gadgets, and conducting data collections within the quarters of the local chief or a 'strong' man. I wore dull clothes, black T-shirts, and worn-out flip-flops, and I did not visit the barber for months before arriving. As such, I remained inconspicuous to avoid attracting unwanted attention to maintain safety and bearability.

Before fieldwork, I thoroughly researched the region's security situation and recent violent incidents. The researcher must investigate the proposed study location, if there is an ongoing conflict scenario, to verify that the bearability level of such a place is not low. To do this, the researcher must assess the tolerability, accessibility, and safety of the study location (see Table 2). Upon arrival in Benue State, the gatekeepers confirmed the accessibility, safety, and tolerability of the research locations. Before data collection, negotiating access and considering cultural and social complexities are vital for the research team's safety (Sangaré & Bleck, 2020). The data collection was strategically timed during the rainy season, May 2022, to avoid the common eco-violence in the Middle Belt region during the dry season; when conflicts over resources were fewer, this timing contributed to the site's bearability or perceived safety and accessibility for research. I evaluated the bearability level of the study locations through various sources and chose safe, visible locations within the communities for the FGDs in Agatu in Benue State and Nasarawa-Eggon in Nasarawa State. The bearability level of the study locations influenced the data collection process, my behaviour, and that of

my local contacts. This consideration, crucial in the credibility and approachability framework, especially in conflict-prone areas, made my positionality more fluid.

Due to the incessant invasions of the study locations at night or early in the morning by armed aggressors, I resorted to travelling from the relatively safe capital city, Makurdi, to the study locations and leaving as soon as I completed the data collection for the day. This approach can be expensive and may hasten the data collection process, potentially influencing the type of data collected. Nonetheless, it ensures the researcher's safety and minimises risk. Fieldwork trips were conducted using unmarked taxis chartered from Makurdi, enhancing safety and retrieval ease. The driver waited in open areas, further boosting site bearability. I conducted daily risk assessments and shared my location via WhatsApp with my supervisors and a government official who was aware of my fieldwork, ensuring constant communication and safety reassurances. Utilising identities, relationships, and gatekeepers is crucial for assessing field information (Ferdoush, 2020).

Unlike the existing components of the credibility and approachability framework, which are performance-based activities consisting of the respondents' perceived characteristics of the researcher (Lofland et al., 2006; Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017), the bearability component involves both performances within the study location as well as the perception of its safety by the researcher and gatekeepers. The credibility and approachability components require the researcher to perform specific characteristics while the respondents perceive them. In contrast, the bearability component dictates that the researcher not only performs certain actions but also perceives the bearability of the study location as performed by gatekeepers, respondents, and situational factors. Therefore, understanding the bearability level of any study location involves both the researcher and the gatekeepers performing and perceiving some attributes of the research site as positive regarding safety, tolerability, and accessibility.

Conclusion

This article shares my experiences as a diaspora-based doctoral researcher navigating fieldwork realities in conflict-affected communities in the "killing fields" in Nigeria. It highlights the challenges and positionalities encountered during data collection and how perceived characteristics like ethnicity, gender, and religion can impact the research process. The article also underscores the importance of adding a "bearability" component to the credibility and approachability frameworks to aid researchers in navigating study sites and interacting with respondents.

Incorporating the bearability component into this framework highlights the need for researchers to adopt and implement protocols for risk assessment, management, and emergency response. It also emphasizes the necessity for researchers to continually assess and adapt to evolving situations and conditions within the study location, whether during the data collection exercise or outside of it. It helps the researcher comprehend their experiences with accessing the site, achieving their objectives (Leigh et al., 2021) and assessing how safe the site is for conducting research. In addition, including these approaches in the research plan and adopting them while on-site could support the researcher in reflecting on and documenting their experiences. Thus, the credibility and approachability framework is not only an analytical approach that assists researchers in understanding their experiences of "getting in" and "getting along" at the research location (Leigh et al., 2021, pp. 1080–1081) but also includes the researchers' experiences of perceiving, accessing, and tolerating the study location and people as safe and exiting the site without problems upon completing the study.

Once more, this article complements and expands the applicability of the credibility and approachability framework, making it more useful in conflict-affected societies and

providing researchers with an additional component to aid in planning and executing their projects. Finally, this article offers some experiential tips that are not exhaustive but provide a guide to build upon when conducting research in the Sahel region.

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