Going local in downtown Kingston, Jamaica
Doing political ethnography and qualitative research in a volatile urban environment

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Abstract
Purpose – Academics examining the global South who engage in informal politics to understand social and political issues should be prepared to diversify their methods toolkit. Informal ties and politics are where one learns about social and economic exclusion. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Mixed qualitative methods – such as individual interviews, surveys, and focus groups – provide an understanding of the people’s perspective, enabling the researcher to truly know what is going on.

Findings – Fieldwork in the downtown communities of Kingston, Jamaica, has an element of danger because violence and politics are very much a part of the daily reality of the people being interviewed. In this paper, the author argues that studying how financial resources are allocated to low-income people and understanding why some groups purposefully self-exclude themselves from economic development programs require unorthodox field methods. The author thus uses political ethnography to understand the experience of marginalized Jamaican people.

Originality/value – Mixed qualitative methods and political ethnography assisted the author to understand the actual experience of marginalized people and politicized financial programs.

Keywords Jamaica, Mixed-methods, Qualitative, Access, Confidentiality, Violence, Focus groups, Gangsters, Political ethnography

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In considering how financial resources are managed and distributed, scholars cannot assume that identity politics are not involved, nor can they neglect considering the points of intersection between those identities. My research involved understanding how identity and political bias affect small-business people. At the time of research, I did not believe my fieldwork would be dangerous or political; however, it was (Hossein, 2016). In 2009, I spent 11 months living in Kingston, Jamaica – the country that forms my main case. The act of speaking to self-employed members of society who refused to rely on handouts from the “local bosses” (i.e. politicians or gangsters, locally referred to as “Dons”) was considered to be a political act. During national elections, downtown Kingston is known for its violence and the accompanying patron-client politics. Brown (2005) argues that academics examining the global South must engage in informal politics if they are to really understand social and political issues affecting people; he suggests that instead of narrowing their methods in analyzing phenomena, political scientists need to diversify their methodology toolkit.

From 2007 to 2009, I carried out fieldwork in six communities in Southwest Kingston, and determined that politics was a chief factor in the “allocation of microloans to low-income entrepreneurs in the slums (Hossein, 2012, 2013, 2016). In this paper, I focus on the methods I used to navigate a complex urban environment and to
adhere to the local culture and employ political ethnography. I am able to reflect on my methods after years of analyzing my data. As a Political Scientist in North America, my work was "unorthodox;" yet it was typical of social scientists in the West Indies. I argue that in studying how financial resources are allocated to low-income people, and understanding why some groups purposefully self-exclude themselves from programs, researchers need to apply political ethnographic field methods. Schatz (2009) explains that "political ethnography" is a method to uncover power dynamics, and in order to use such a method effectively requires the researcher be fully immersed in the society.

My training in methodology was through Caribbean-based scholars. I learned that in order to grasp social and economic exclusion in the Jamaican context, one has to understand the informal ties and partisan politics. My methods unraveled the interplay of clientelist and identity politics that excludes and forces poor businesspeople to self-exclude from microfinance. I employed mixed qualitative methods such as individual interviews, surveys, and focus group sessions in order to understand peoples’ views and to truly uncover the situation of a cross-section of people. My fieldwork in the downtown communities of Kingston had an element of danger that I had to take into account in its planning; violence and politics are embedded in the daily lives of the people I interviewed.

2. The motivation of qualitative research
After significant work and living experience in Sub-Saharan Africa, often as the only person of African descent managing a microfinance program, I encountered racialized issues. However, I did not anticipate that my being a black woman Researcher would come under scrutiny by Canada’s Government. I was wrong. On November 19, 2008, I was detained without justification for several hours by immigration officials working for Canada Customs at Lester B. Pearson Airport in Toronto. My fieldwork in several countries known to be source countries for drug smuggling (Jamaica, Barbados, and Guyana) aroused suspicion in the officials. Authorities held me, along with several other black women and men, under the false belief that we were drug “mules.” Eventually, following a thorough personal search, they released me. My claim to be a Doctoral Candidate performing field research was judged incompatible with my race, culture, age, and destinations. The immigration officials I encountered were poorly trained. They engaged with me in a hostile manner, dismissing my University of Toronto identity card, business cards, and field notes as legitimate proof that I was, as I claimed, a third-year PhD Student (Hossein, 2012). Caribbean people of color travelling to North America often undergo such indignities, but I was misguided to think my Canadian citizenship—including a Canadian passport—would prevent such harassment by and within my own country[1].

This experience made me realize that I needed to find theories and methods that were considerate of black people’s experiences. My personal location as it relates to this work explains, at least in part, why I selected the methods I did. In the field, I was conscious of my relatively privileged background and sense of being foreign in the context of my immediate social environment; yet, I readily adapted to the culture because it was already familiar to me. I like to see my place in this study as “semi-native:” I was born and educated in the West, but my domestic upbringing was Caribbean, and travelling between these two social spaces therefore came naturally to me. Edwards (1993) posits that for development to be meaningful, it should not hide behind objectivity; theory should instead trigger change in practice. I take the position...
that social exclusion in society cannot be analyzed objectively, and that methods should be used that can seek out answers in the local context.

The Jamaican researchers I contacted prior to executing my field research were convinced that subjects would speak to me more freely than might otherwise be the case because of my foreign background: I was not a citizen of that country. (These researchers, I should add, came from a variety of respected professional, academic, and social organizations and institutions). It is true that the recognized geographical placement of Jamaican communities in North America ensured that once I revealed where I lived to my subjects, they replied they were familiar with it: many of them did know of Lansdowne in the West End of Toronto. Yet it is still the case that when we, as citizens of the First World, travel to countries in the Third, we do so with our own set of biases. This fact holds true regardless of whether we are — relative to the culture of the country in question — a native, a semi-native, or an outsider.

Skeptical of the assurances of Jamaican scholars, who all believed it was better to perform research from the cultural outside, I was in fact very aware of my own private social hurdles and personal biases. After several interviews with local researchers, I decided it was important for the quality of my research to have research assistants (RAs) who were community-based[2]. A civil society activist involved in large-scale peace-building projects recommended that the social spaces I was to pass through should be, as much as possible, non-political ones. Proceeding through local leaders or political persons to obtain acceptable RAs would taint my scholarship. In theory, this seemed intelligent advice. In practice, where my complete social situation appeared highly political, it remained unclear how I was to ensure this.

3. Methods

A mixed-methods approach allowed me to uncover politically sensitive issues and double-check the work. Because of the political nature of my findings, and the potential opposition from supporters within the industry, I had to test and re-test my methods. Data collection for this project focused on businesspeople who wanted or who have (or had) a micro-loan. Businesspersons participated in either individual interviews or a focus group session and accounted for 233 businesspersons (or 76 percent of the entire sample). In a number of cases, market vendors wanted meetings to take place at their business so they could work while I interviewed them. Others requested that I come to their homes, enabling me to observe their home setting and share in their work and life. On several occasions, I remained with a subject for an entire day, sitting beside retailers at home, in a shop, or in a market stall. Many of the subjects had home-based businesses, such as a grocery shop in the front part of the home, so I could witness the home and work life simultaneously. This format allowed me to understand people’s contexts and observe them in a typical setting: in other words, to share in their “lived experience” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Seidman, 2006; Maxwell, 2005).

Data about micro-businesses in the informal sector are hard to come by (University of the West Indies (UWI), 2006) and often does not interrogate why people cannot access micro loans. The goal of this project was to investigate hidden perceptions and to examine empirical data in order to understand the two operational limits to effective microfinance within marginalized communities in Kingston: that many people, especially men, are excluded from microfinance programs because of partisan politics, a politics that subjugates businesspersons along identities pertaining to class, race, and gender; and that businesspeople self-exclude themselves from microfinance when
clientelism, active through both politicians and dons, is present. Data collection included interviews and focus groups with 233 businessmen and women in six inner-city communities in Kingston (Hossein, 2012). I employed political ethnography methods in the inner-city contexts – where informal powers control access to both people and information – to describe the communities in detail. Other qualitative techniques included photography documentation and textual analysis of policy documents and peer-reviewed articles.

If a researcher wants to access a community, it is important to have a network. In Jamaica, this is certainly the case: arriving with a referral is essential. People often said “Don’t worry you will meet everyone you need to meet in good time.” As they predicted, in a relatively small society such as Jamaica where interpersonal relations are denser, it was eventually possible to meet the people I needed to meet. It is also important for a researcher to examine how people are connected. On more than one occasion I ran into people who had not responded to my e-mails or phone calls in-person at a dinner or meeting. Such chance encounters in the microfinance sector are possible in Kingston.

3.1 Political ethnography as a method
Political ethnography and participant-observation were relevant to this research. Given the stark divide and divergence between uptown and downtown, ethnographic research mitigated the possibility of the study being dismissed as mere perception. Past studies (University of the West Indies (UWI), 2006) in Jamaica have shown that it can be difficult to access communities to collect data from micro businesspersons, particularly those residing in marginalized and stigmatized, political inner-city communities[3]. Data obtained at the macro-level may not reflect the realities in these communities. To gain access and conduct fieldwork in these communities at the micro-level therefore requires the use of political ethnography (Bayard de Volo, 2009 ; Schatz, 2009). In this project, my methods included participant-observation at bank offices, elite meetings, social functions, and the homes of businesspersons interviewed, as well as on the streets, at arcades, and in markets, roadside stalls, or shops where interviews took place. Photos document the downtown areas where fieldwork was conducted (Tafari-Ama, 2006)[4].

Multiple methods and political ethnography can enhance the findings in fieldwork (Bayard de Volo, 2009). As this work examined the role of informal institutions in Kingston, understanding how these processes operate often required careful observation and unorthodox methods, including spontaneous phone calls and meetings, and casual “liming” with subjects at locations outside of their home turf, where nobody knew them. For the structured and semi-structured interviews and self-administered surveys, interview tools were standardized as much as possible to enable comparison across the cases; but the tools were adapted to fit the local, contextual realities. Interviews were designed so that people could tell a story; and, at times, they involved dialogue to develop trust. However, the interviewer’s focus was to listen.

Every effort was made to ensure data triangulation – collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings and using a variety of methods: for example, focus groups with micro businesspersons and in-depth interviews with stakeholders and microfinance leaders[5]. The triangulation strategy (Maxwell, 2005) mitigates the risk of systematic biases and enables a better assessment of the data. In this study, having both an outsider and local perspectives during the fieldwork, I was able to shift roles as appropriate. Moreover, the large number of women involved ensured that there was a gender lens in the data collection (Hossein, 2013). RAs were crucial to making
businesspeople feel at ease. They would meet businesspeople first to inform them of the research process and to secure their permission to participate in the study. As people feared reprisals for divulging information, it was vital that a trusted person confirmed that all rules were followed. Sometimes just knowing when to write and when not to write was important[6]. In some spaces, I was able to write freely, whereas in others, such as in areas with high people-traffic such as open-markets, I was not able to write things down. I did not use a tape recorder in any of my country cases, as this would have limited my access to sensitive information. Qualitative methods using political ethnography are appropriate in this context given the complexity of getting information from people living in communities that are constrained by party politics.

3.2 Participant-observation

Participant-observation was important to this work. At a number of the commercial banks in New Kingston and downtown, I spent many hours inside the institutions tracking client movements. Observation permitted me to see the type of clients at JNBSLL branch offices in New Kingston or HalfWayTree, compared to clients at First Caribbean in New Kingston or Scotiabank Jamaica branches downtown and uptown. During data collection, I went to a number of banks to try and open a bank account in order to understand the process. To open a simple savings account requires a number of documents, including a TRN, national identity card, and proof of address and in some cases a letter from an employer. Interaction with front-line staff at the microfinance institutions helped to familiarize me with the type of people hired. I participated in several loan officer interviews at microfinance retailers. I observed loan officer interviews with new and active clients, as well as shadowing loan officers in the field when they visited clients about repayment or default issues. First-hand experiences with front-line staff permitted me to see who the clients are and how staff interacted with clients and potential clients. Such experiences enriched the data collection and allowed me to return to the elite interviewees with follow-up questions.

3.3 Controlling for party politics in the methods

A large part of this study involved going local, and was dedicated to understanding how people live; to this end, I tried to get close to poor citizens to see for myself how they access money for business and consumption needs (Collins et al., 2009). After several interviews with local researchers, I realized that to ensure the quality of my research I needed to find RAs who were community-based and knew the intricacies of the neighborhoods. Local RAs provided contextual explanations and defined subtle cultural nuances, relevant to those criteria that were unknown to me. For example, in the section of Tivoli Gardens where we collected data, housing (overcrowded and unkempt houses) is not always a marker of poverty. The RAs defined who were poor based on local definitions. The RAs came from the six communities included in the study: East Central St Andrew, South West St Andrew, St Andrew South, and West Kingston. It is unlikely that access to these communities would have been possible otherwise.

It was evident that political people or party activists in the community could negatively affect the results of this inquiry, because such persons could, during the interviews, alienate some businesspersons. It remained unclear to me at times, however, how I could ensure that the people involved in my project were not engaged in partisan and party politics. My employment of local assistants – persons whose political experience was either absent or otherwise – was thus a requirement for this study.
All of the RAs, many of whom were referred to me by non-partisan local notables, had lived experiences in the selected communities, and each brought their own instructive lens to the project. They were all black and from low-income backgrounds. Four assistants were single mothers with some high school education; the fifth was a young Rastafarian man who had some college-level education. All of them in their working lives were either semi-employed or unemployed, and all of them approached their work on this project in a professional manner. They were my link to the community in finding and meeting the businesspersons who met the criteria for interviews my method had established. The criteria were as follows: they owned a business activity conducting activities that were legal[7]; business was their main source of income and the subjects operated their respective businesses; the gross monthly sales of those businesses ranged from US$300 to US$4,000 and each businessperson had micro-loan experience, and either has or is a member in an peer-lending group.

3.4 Interviews and data collection in the communities
My intention was to design interview tools so that people could tell a story and, at times, engage in dialogue. Questions were written so that ordinary people could provide similar information that could be quantified and compared; other parts of the tool consisted of open-ended questions so that people could convey a narrative. In-depth structured interview tools focused on four main areas: individual enterprise; politics and microfinance; identities in microfinance; community development. Interviews with managers and stakeholders were structured and semi-structured. Businesspeople participated in either individual interviews or a focus group session. Each of the tools was helpful in obtaining minute details from the participants; the focus groups provided information on the bigger picture as well. In total, 156 individual interviews were conducted, and 77 persons participated in seven focus groups. In Whitfield Town, focus groups were scheduled but had to be cancelled twice due to war and flare-ups, as, when violence occurs in the community, residents will not venture outside of their homes for a week or more, depending on the scale of violence.

The slums in Kingston are mainly located in the Southwest part of the city called downtown (south of Cross Roads), and include the neighborhoods of Trench Town, Bennett’s Land, Whitfield Town, Rose town, Frog City, and the prime minister’s constituency of Denham Town and Tivoli Gardens (Hossein, 2012; Howard, 2005)[8] (see the URL of a map below). The communities in this study fit the definition of “garrison,” that is, they are political strongholds controlled by a political party (Rapley, 2006; Figueroa and Sives, 2003; Harriott, 2003). Kingston communities were selected based on high incidences of poverty, party stronghold, relatively good access to the community, and a large pool of very small-business persons from which to select interviewees. A total of 307 persons were interviewed in Jamaica.


A total of 233 businesspeople, of which 63 percent were women, were interviewed, and scores of informal conversations were held with businesspeople from areas outside of the six communities (see Table I). Two types of interview methods were employed in this study: individual interviews and focus groups. Subjects were either elites (retailers, wholesalers, or stakeholders) or ordinary people. Individual interviews were conducted in-person and were unstructured, semi-structured, or in-depth. In-depth interviews were designed so that participants could convey a narrative of their experiences. In addition, survey questionnaires were e-mailed to elites as a follow-up to the
individual in-person interviews. In the focus group sessions, a fixed number of subjects (businesspersons) were invited at a specific time and place to discuss prepared questions with the interviewer.

Since businesspeople are busy people, all 156 individual interviews were conducted on-site and lasted approximately 45 minutes; some interviews were conducted in two sets. In cases where interviews required more time, I would re-visit the subjects. On most occasions, I remained with a subject an entire day, sitting beside retailers at home, in shops, or in market stalls. In a number of cases, businesspeople wanted to meet at their place of business so they could work while being interviewed, others requested that we come to their homes; this enabled us to observe their home setting, and share in their work and life. Many of the subjects had home-based businesses, such as a grocery shop in the front part of their homes, so we could witness their home and work life simultaneously. This format allowed me to understand their context and observe them in a typical setting: in other words, to share in the person’s “lived experience” (Seidman, 2006). A snowball effect occurred in public settings as I could easily move from vendor to vendor.

Most focus groups were “mixed-sex,” and Jamaican women dominated these discussions, with men receiving only token representation. In fact, women participants often corrected the men, openly disagreed with their ideas, and mocked their use of patois, telling the men to “speak propa English” (standard English) and not the Jamaican vernacular[10]. Given that understanding gender dynamics is important in examining the unique challenges men confront with microfinance, I became concerned about gender balance. For the first time in my career, and I have done many focus groups, I set up two all-male focus group sessions to ensure that businessmen could also tell their interpretations of the operations of microfinance[11].

Elite interviewees were composed of two main groups: practitioners/microfinance leaders and others. Among the former group were “retailers” (direct micro-lenders) and “wholesalers” (on-lending funds to the microfinance sector) and “banker ladies,” who run peer-lending groups, called partner. Although “banker ladies” are not elites, they supply financial services to businesspeople and I counted them as stakeholders because they could see the larger picture and were not taking micro loans from professionalized banking projects. The second group was made up of an assortment of “stakeholders,” defined as individuals vested in micro-enterprise development in inner-city Kingston (not direct lenders). Stakeholders included policy-makers, academics, local community activists, non-profit organizations, area leaders, donors, politicians,
religious leaders, and government technocrats. Despite the variances among the elites, more specifically those working in the microfinance sector and those on the periphery, a similar structured tool was applied to all elite interviews to allow for comparative perspectives. The elite interview tool included four sections: general industry; politics and microfinance; microfinance and identities; and microfinance and social capital. For “bankers” I used a slightly technical tool, asking more details on lending and the micro market; for the stakeholders I focused on questions about community development, social capital, and empowerment.

With the exception of the “banker ladies,” elite interviews did not require the same kind of access “permission” process as interviewing businesspersons in the garrisons. A researcher requires “links” and networks to set up meetings with elites, and most of these were in uptown areas like New Kingston and in and around the downtown corridor at Duke Street, Ocean Blvd, and Church Street. Some elites – particularly those in credit unions, government agencies, and private finance companies – were located at Cross Roads and the Half Way Tree area (mid-town, where uptown and downtown meet).

3.5 Secondary materials
I also collected information from secondary materials, including local newspapers; Jamaica’s national papers The Gleaner and the Jamaican Observer; as well as regional papers such as Haiti’s Le Nouvelliste; Guyana’s private newspapers Kaieteur News and Stabroek News; and Trinidad’s Guardian on-line paper. I also used textual analyses of reports and internal documents; and participant observation of life settings, film, and photography. Jamaican research institutions have excellent secondary materials and data on the country’s social and economic environment. These institutions include the Planning Institute of Jamaica); the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies; the main library of the University of West Indies (UWI)/Mona; the Statistical Institute of Jamaica; and the Social Development Commission (SDC)[12]. The Labour Survey Report provided information on the socio-economic background of residents for the six urban communities included in this study, as well as nationally based information.

4. Discussion: key concepts in qualitative research in volatile environments
Conducting fieldwork in politicized inner-city contexts in Jamaica is no easy task regardless of how non-political the work is considered to be. At the beginning of this research, I knew my work would be sensitive, but I was unprepared for the levels of discomfort some of the elites interviewed would feel when talking about politics and microfinance. One leading advocate for micro and small enterprise development stated that she was unsure whether people would reveal their perspectives about politics[13]. Having completed my ethical review for human subjects at the University of Toronto, I was sensitive to the importance of informed consent and signed letters of consent. In Jamaica, however, the signing of these letters was counterproductive to data collection. One stakeholder candidly stated “I am not signing anything. The fact you are here implies you have my consent.” The option of signing informed consent letters was offered instead, but one or two subjects would not sign any papers.

Too often, we discuss these communities in abstract, without contacting or otherwise reaching them directly. Each community’s reaction to this study varied substantially. Within Arnett Gardens, a district in Trench Town (also known as
“upper yard”), reactions were different among residents within the community. For example, businesspersons in Texas, Havana, and along Lincoln Avenue were over-researched and fed-up with people coming to study them; those that agreed to participate in the study appeared guarded in their responses. Whereas in areas such as Angola and Zimbabwe, businesspersons readily participated because they felt marginalized compared to the other areas. In Maxfield Park, businesspeople were proud of their status as businesspersons and took the interviews seriously. Many residents in Maxfield Park said they wished more researchers would work with them; this may be because in certain pockets of Maxfield Park there are few (or no) outside organizations working in these areas[14]. Citizens in Whitfield Town were shocked to see a foreign gyal ‘ere (a foreigner here) and often had a litany of questions for me. Whitfield Town residents asked to be interviewed, knowing that the interviews were completely voluntary. In Rosetown[15], businesspeople responded favorably to interviews and would recommend people, causing a snowball effect. Businesspersons in Tivoli Gardens freely spoke to me and, as in Rosetown, asked to be interviewed. Usually, people were curious about what I was doing in their community and how the project could assist them personally. In very few cases, I compensated businesspersons for individual interviews. However, for the focus groups, compensation in the form of per diem (and a souvenir) was provided, as it required people to meet at a specific location and time.

Conducting individual or focus group sessions required the support of a trusted local person, even after permission was granted, so that trust could develop between the interviewer and the subject. The establishment of this trust required sharing my own personal information; however, my primary role was to listen to the participants’ stories. Often businesspeople interrogated the goals of this project and asked personal questions about me, as the interview was seen as “an exchange for information” (Tafari-Ama, 2006). In downtown Kingston, where life is based on personal relationships, employing a political ethnographic approach and participant-observation at each site visit unfolded rather naturally. It was common sense to work with informants in the marketplace, at their home, or place of business to understand the locale (Ulysse, 2007; Tafari-Ama, 2006). At times “hanging on a street corner” or “talking in a yard” or “sitting on a bucket at a stall” felt more like socializing, but it was a site for the collection of rich research material in these spaces where businesspeople make money and discuss the politics of the day.

4.1 Going local: integration into the local community
A large part of this study was dedicated to understanding how people live; to this end, I tried to integrate myself locally[16]. In carrying out political science research in complex urban areas, Geertz’s “experience-near” concept of a researcher being close to the subject’s reality yet far enough away for critical detachment finally made sense to me. In no way could I completely understand people’s daily struggles during my time in Kingston, but my efforts “to do as they do” put me closer to their reality. Using a car would likely have made my work easier in some respects; but, as I quickly learned from civil society experts, having a car, no matter how shabby, would have set me apart from the people I wanted to understand, as most people downtown do not own a vehicle.

To get around Kingston, therefore, I walked or used local transportation, such as the JUTA public buses. Within a few weeks, I started using private transport carriers, such as “coasters” (mini vans) and “robot taxis” (unregistered shared cabs)
to get downtown[17]. Formal taxicab companies, such as On-time and Confidence, would not go to certain communities in West Kingston. I quickly learned that getting a taxi to go to communities south of Cross Roads at any time of day was difficult. Coasters and robot taxis often mimic the bus routes all over Kingston. For about the same price as a bus, one can get to his or her destination faster with these informal carriers. Each coaster has a conductor (locally called “ductors”) who leans out of the van yelling “Town, Town, Town” to attract customers. To get off at their desired stop, passengers yell out “bus stop” over the cranked up dancehall, gospel, or reggae music.

A typical day in the field entailed walking to Half Way Tree[18], where I would catch a robot taxi. To work in West Kingston, I would go to Half Way Tree and take a coaster or bus to North Parade near Liberty Hall and walk along Beckford Street to Darling Street. To work in Maxfield Park, I would usually take a robot taxi from the Half Way Tree car park (in front of Juici’s Patties) and get off at Queen Avenue and Chisholm Avenue and walk to Ricketts Avenue, where Rosseau Primary School is located. If I stayed late in the community, people would walk me to my transport stop and wait with me until I got a ride uptown.

Once access to a community was given, the local assistants knew how to manage their presence in the field: they knew when to stay and when to leave. In some communities, businesspeople preferred to speak in privacy; other times participants wanted a local person present to ease their comfort level. Crime, violence, and safety issues varied from community to community. Within all of the communities in this study, we walked on foot and, in some cases, took robot taxis to meet businesspersons at home, in arcades or markets, or at their shops and roadside stalls. In Whitfield Town, work was suspended a number of times due to “war” between informal leaders and over turf issues. Local assistants knew when it was safe to move around on foot and when we were required to avoid certain locations due to gunfire. Plate 1 is of a typical street with corrugated iron fencing for the tenement yards where I would conduct interviews before moving into the “yard.”

While conducting interviews in Rosetown, gunshots were heard in Rema (Trench Town). But the RAs, having years of experience living in the area, were able to gage how close gunshots were from where we were working, and I was assured.
that the conflict was far enough away and we would be fine. The female RAs felt more at ease than men about moving around in the most volatile communities. The women employed personal techniques and charm to make male gatekeepers comfortable with an outsider in the community. Most stakeholders agreed that employing female RAs was prudent because women are less threatening to gangs than men. However, I did employ one man as an assistant (see above) in order to ensure the inclusion of a male perspective. He was able to move freely in different areas on his bicycle because of his religious and non-political stance with regard to the establishment and the state.

The locally based RAs understood that the complex rifts in their communities were important to the methodology of this study. Through their eyes, and very much like the businesspeople, they were able to understand the complex cleavages in their communities and were able to bring out class, race, and gender issues in how microfinance was allocated. The insider-outsider lens employed in this study was thus an integral part of the work. The local lens ensured that the methodological and theoretical frameworks I used were appropriate for the poor black communities I was researching. Close alliances and working relationships with the assistants enabled me to understand the issues under inquiry within the context of the life of a “business person” or a “small businessman tryin’ a ting” at the ground level.

Social events are also provided spaces where people relax and speak freely about politics and their lives; political ambiguities and issues of the day often surface in these contexts. However, socializing and becoming emotionally involved in the communities I researched also carried with it some risk. UWI academics recount stories of foreign doctoral students who became emotionally attached to their communities and risked losing critical detachment. Despite these risks, I found that political ethnography is pertinent to understanding power in the Jamaican inner-city context.

4.2 Aliases, access, and confidentiality
Confidentiality is particularly significant to this research, and given the sensitive issue of politics, bias, and money, it was best not to press people to sign forms or to tape them. In the region, using “aliases” (nicknames) was common and I did this for all the businesspersons I interviewed in order to protect their identities. In many cases, I also avoided including details and modified dates and locations to ensure complete anonymity. Jamaican Scholar Tafari-Ama (2006) also did this in her highly sensitive book on drugs and crimes in low-income downtown communities. Protecting people’s identities – especially those at the micro-level and stakeholders (such as government or policy makers) who defied the status quo – was important. Although some participants said that it was not needed, I found that once I guaranteed complete anonymity, people would disclose classified information. For interviews with downtown micro businesspersons, not only did I have to assure confidentiality, but I had to receive local permission before people were comfortable talking to an “outdoor” (outside) person.

Aliases or pet names are one way of concealing a person’s real identity from people outside the community. The aliases of subjects in this study included “Fatty,” “Shotta,” “Tall man,” and “Big Reds”[19]. I was also given the local name “Fluffy” by research participants[20]. Confidentiality and anonymity are particularly significant in Kingston. Gunst’s (2003) Born Fi Dead, a controversial book about Jamaican posses...
(gangs) in Kingston and in the USA, was reported to have led to the death of two of his informants[21]. Academics and researchers at the UWI, familiar with this context, point out that research can have dire consequences for local people long after outsiders have gone. Making sure the right steps are taken to ensure people’s confidentiality and to secure proper access is critical in working in political stronghold areas in Kingston. Coaching sessions with a UWI professor who works extensively in the inner cities in Kingston were helpful to me in this regard.

Gaining access to communities as a researcher is difficult, and it takes time to secure permission for fieldwork in Kingston, particularly in locations considered to be “garrisons” or with gangsters in charge of the community. Political strongholds or garrison communities are linked to major political parties: the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) or the People’s National Party (PNP). Structured garrison communities have an established local structure, “one order,” with a don(s) who is in charge of the local activities and community “links” who navigate access channels. In less structured communities, permission to engage in research may be required from multiple area leaders or dons. In each of the six communities included in this study, we had to obtain permission from informal leaders, either dons or area leaders, to conduct research. Waiting periods for permissions required some flexibility for delays, as it was uncertain whether permission would be granted. In one community, I waited almost four months before getting access.

Without a guarantee of safety or permission, subjects would not speak to me. A “foreigner” or “outdoor person” (external to the place) cannot enter these communities without moving through the appropriate channels. My first point of reference in a community was usually through a prominent academic or local activist who had “links” to local leaders, including gangsters. As noted above, some of the communities, such as Trench Town, had multiple informal leaders, and permission was required for each area. Sometimes the local activists had authority to allow me to work in their community; and as long as I identified with their organization, I was cleared to move freely in the community. In some cases, a community activist provided credibility to my work, and I was able to start data collection while they arranged for permission behind the scenes. In areas with less informal structures, we needed to get permission from an area leader to access specific lanes or areas. Knowing the area borders is vital, and my local assistants knew these boundaries well. In some cases, when interviews snowballed into other communities, my assistants could not go with me, so I went alone. One area leader told me, “No Labourite could come into disya area neva and not fi dead” (translation: no person who belongs to the JLP is allowed into this community ever; otherwise it is very dangerous and they could die for it). Crossing borders could be risky and cause conflict (Interview, 2009). These borders are often invisible to outside people but well known within the community. Access affected which communities were selected in this study.

Access into the community started only after permission was granted. With permission granted, leaders would then suggest a (non-political) person from the community to assist in the project. Through this person, I shared my interview tools and research plans and provided a job description for a research assistant. I met, interviewed, and hired local assistants on my own. Local assistants facilitated the research process by assuring businessespeople that permission had been granted and by vouching for me. Confirmation from a trusted local person meant that subjects could participate in the study without worrying about being perceived as an informant. In September 2009, my work was curtailed in Tivoli Gardens due to
an American extradition request for local Don Christopher “Dudus” Cokes (Al-Jazeera, 2010). The uncertainty surrounding this matter meant that violence was possible. Local persons advised me that I should not return to the community because of the tensions and that my “foreign-ness” could put the research subjects at risk.

Methodology can be limited if it is not reflexive. My professional work experience in the Jamaican microfinance sector in 2007 enabled me to draw on my previous colleagues for interviewees and connections to potential interviewees among peers they viewed as leaders in the sector. This method is an adapted version of the snowballing technique, called “leaders naming leaders,” employed by Political Scientist Hintzen (1989) in his work in Guyana and Trinidad. Within weeks of my arrival, I was able to meet the mainstream microfinance leaders in Kingston, Jamaica.

Having my own “links” or referrals to a community, however, was not sufficient. I had to pass through a series of small test-like situations with the local gatekeepers who know the local bosses before I could go into people’s homes and spend time with them. By following the rules, I ensured not only my safety, but also that of the local people, since accessing a community entailed assuring people’s anonymity. This process took time, and it is one of the reasons I could not share my contacts and links with other researchers.

As the moneylenders were not connected to the mainstream microfinance sector or the development experts at the time of this research, they were not part of my “leaders naming leaders” method. By triangulating my data through reading national newspapers and interviewing ordinary people, I uncovered new retailers. Elites did not identify “moneylenders” as part of the microfinance sector in our interviews, but businesspeople did. The state agency that collects information on the micro, small, and medium enterprise sector for the annual publication of the Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica was most useful. One flaw in the “naming leaders” method was that retailers who were not networked into mainstream microfinance could easily be excluded. Despite reaching a number of retailers in the sector, I found that one vital group—private finance companies—was missing in my work.

Something rarely successful in Jamaica occurred: meeting people without referrals. After checking with national papers and verifying with businesspeople about the moneylenders, I realized that this group of retailers must be included in the study. On April 12, 2009, The Gleaner reported that moneylenders formed an association, and they were lowering interest rates on a pool of funds for microfinance to assist micro businesspeople during the financial recession. After reading this article, I made cold calls to these private finance companies. In having multiple methods, I was informed relatively early on that my work was missing private financial actors. This Gleaner article about moneylenders thus led to my meeting with the largest private finance companies in microfinance: Kris An Charles and First Union Financial Services Limited. Through cold calls and a bit of luck, I met with the main moneylenders; and by October 2009 I was linked to this, somewhat “underground,” private money-lending sector. I discovered more than ten private finance companies engaged in micro-lending in Kingston, and soon learned that these private finance companies have a significant market share in these communities.

5. Conclusion
A principal challenge for political scientists is to find concepts and frameworks to explain complex realities. Often in developing contexts it is through informal politics...
that significant phenomena occur; yet political scientists tends to focus, incorrectly, on formal institutions. In this study, political ethnography guided the various methodologies in micro-level research. Each side has its story, and the multi-method approach employed in this study helped by triangulating information so that a more complete story could be represented. Interviews with elites suggested one thing; but once multiple methods were applied, divergent views from businesspeople across the political spectrum exposed other truths about microfinance in downtown Kingston.

Secondary materials, such as peer-reviewed articles, newspapers, and policy documents, assisted in unraveling what was going on in the hidden space of the Jamaican microfinance sector. Methods and theory should not drive the process, but instead should assist the researcher to uncover the findings.

Methods and tools should complement the theoretical framework (Schatz, 2009). Mixed qualitative methods, and political ethnography in particular, were appropriate tools for this study, given the complexity of obtaining information from people living in political strongholds. It was important in this study to include three groups of interviewees — stakeholders, microfinance practitioners, and businesspeople — as they revealed divergent opinions, ideas, and perceptions about politics and microfinance.

Because this study examines the role of informal institutions in Kingston, Jamaica, an understanding of how these power dynamics operate required careful observation and sometimes unorthodox methods.

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Notes

1. The superintendent at Lester B. Pearson Airport and Peter Van Loen, then Federal Minister of Public Safety, both wrote letters of reprimand to the staff person in question, copies of which were also forwarded to me. A formal complaint of this incident is lodged at the Ministry of Public Safety.

2. Suggestions made to the author by the Caribbean Policy and Research Institute (February 12 and March 9, 2009) and at the Planning Institute of Jamaica, as well as several informal sessions at the University of West Indies, Mona Campus in the Government Department from March to April 2009.

3. See SDC community profiles: Denham Town residents list negative perception and stigma as community priorities that need to change.

5. Stakeholders and microfinance leaders are referred to as “elite interviews.” More specifically, stakeholders are individuals familiar with microfinance and inner-city communities and microfinance leaders refer to retailers lending to the microfinance clients directly as well as wholesalers that on-lend funds to microfinance retailers.

6. Haitian-American Professor Herns Louis Marcelin in Cite Soleil often discussed issues verbally and with other persons, and once in the vehicle and away from people wrote down his notes entirely from memory.

7. A number of businesses operating illegal activities were located in these areas but screened out from my research, which stipulated that businesses had to be legally eligible for a micro loan. Some of them thought that in this decision I was being biased and making an unacceptable judgment call against their livelihoods.

8. Kingston slums for this study were selected based on high incidences of poverty, party stronghold, relatively good access to the community, and a large pool of small businesspersons.

9. see Duncan-Waite and Woolcock’s (2008) article.

10. See Carolyn Cooper’s (2009) comments on “Language Politics” about the relationship between patois and social class in Jamaica.

11. An all-male focus group was held in Trench Town on August 22, 2009, and another one at Tivoli Gardens on August 25, 2009 (suggestion made by “Bling”).

12. Smaller libraries with good MFI reports are housed at the Small Business Association of Jamaica, the Agency of Inner City Renewal (AIR), Development Options Limited, and in the Economics Department at UWI/Mona.

13. This person’s own political affiliation was known to me before I met her. It was later confirmed through articles about her political activism in The Gleaner.

14. A number of civil society experts said openly that parts of Maxfield Park are “forgotten areas.” Local agencies also say that this area is completely neglected and many believe that the elected officials prefer it this way. Community organizations, such as S Corner, Hope for Children Development Corporation, and Agency for Inner City Renewal, all work in nearby surrounding areas but do not include Maxfield Park, particularly squatter tenement areas.

15. Rosetown is split between the two rival political parties: the upper part (around the intersection of Lincoln Avenue and Maxfield Park Avenue) is a PNP stronghold, and the lower part (off of Spanish Town Road) is a JLP stronghold.

16. My US Peace Corps training experience in Benin served to assimilate me into a local community.


18. See Howard (2005) for a historical review of Kingston. Howard described Half Way Tree as a place “marked by its looming clock tower, was built as a memorial to King Edward VII in 1813” (p. 118).

19. This was a suggestion made by Judith Teichman of the University of Toronto.

20. The term “Fluffy” was coined by a popular Jamaican Comedienne called Miss Kitty to refer to a fat and sexy diva.

21. Copies of this book were banned from bookstores in Kingston, allegedly by former Prime Minister Edward Seaga.
References


Gunst, L. (2003), Born Fi Dead: A Journey through the Yardie Underworld, Canongate, Edinburgh.


Further reading

Economic and Social Survey Jamaica (ESSJ) (2008), PIOJ, Kingston.


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