Chapter 17. Navigating Formality and Familiarity: Balancing Research and Relationships in Your Own Community

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In November 2021, I began data collection for my dissertation with an interview with my uncle. "Could you tell me what happened when your Chinese school was closed?" I asked.

My research focused on the experiences of Thai Chinese elders who studied in Chinese schools during the suppressive periods against the Chinese in Thailand. I used narrative inquiry and ethnography to capture and amplify the experiences and voices of minorities, prioritizing the experiences of the Thai Chinese elders, some of whom are my relatives. During their storytelling, I observed a subtle shift in their demeanor, especially in my uncles. Rather than addressing themselves in the familiar terms typically used within family circles, they adopted a more formal tone, employing pronouns such as "Phom" (which means "I" in Thai) to refer to themselves. Their formality forced me to confront my positionality within the community, drawing a line between me as a researcher and my original connection with them as their niece.

Similar instances occurred with other relatives over subsequent months as I continued interviewing them. Through close observation and frequent visits, I realized that their formality may have stemmed from unfamiliarity with being interviewed and interactions with recording devices, not as a cue that excluded or separated me from the community. As our rapport strengthened and familiarity grew, these barriers gradually dissipated. Allowing ample time for them to acclimate to my presence, which included the device and the academic responsibility I carried, helped foster a sense of trust and openness.

A year later, when I returned to Thailand for follow-up interviews, I witnessed a transformation in my participants' attitudes as their familiarity with my work grew. The use of "Phom" decreased, replaced by the kinship terms we typically used. This was a big relief for me as it represented the trust we had rebuilt, as a researcher and participants, over time. Our conversations contained more details and emotions. However, the increased familiarity also led to their eagerness to assist, which occasionally turned into overcompensation and potential biases in the data collected. To reduce this familiarity bias, I supplemented my research with archival sources and perspectives from individuals outside the immediate community.

In addition to addressing familiarity bias, I faced another dimension of tension arising from the power dynamics inherent in my role as a younger member

of the community. In my culture, asking older people a lot of questions might be considered disrespectful. My aunt once frowned when I asked my uncle about his parents and his family's literacy. This made me uneasy about prying into their lives or questioning senior relatives. To navigate this dynamic, I facilitated conversations involving multiple family or community members, allowing for a more organic exchange of information. While this approach enriched the discourse and provided diverse perspectives, it posed challenges in transcription and occasionally diverted the narrative trajectory.

To address these power dynamics and the navigation of familiarity and formality, I highlighted my positionality and approach in both my dissertation and articles. I aim to demonstrate the unavoidable potential biases inherent in research involving humans, especially within your own community, and honor transparency regarding my relationship with participants.

In conclusion, navigating the complexities of fieldwork and balancing the formality and familiarity allowed me to learn and evolve, forging connections that bridge academic inquiry with personal understanding. This experience not only enriched my research but also reflected the reality of working with people closely connected to us.