

Chapter 24. Balancing an Insider and Outsider Perspective: Positionality as a Practice of Mindfulness

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It's January 6, 2021. I have been following the news religiously as part of my dissertation. I see that the Capitol is being stormed as an attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election. As the news unfolds, I must hop on a Zoom call to interview one of my participants. We begin talking about the insurrection. She tells me that the election was rigged. It has long been my belief that as a qualitative researcher, I am to listen and be empathetic, and I am to find ways to connect with my participants. In that moment, balancing what was happening in Washington D.C., and what I was hearing from my participant, I struggled. This interview was the most difficult one I have ever conducted. It was more important than ever to listen empathetically and thus turn off the natural instinct for rebuttal.

My dissertation, *Navigating Political Identity in the Big Red Dot: Political Conversations among Rural Oklahoman College Students*, was about how rural students underwent political socialization and identity development through political conversations in the lead-up to the 2020 Presidential Elections. Actively listening to my participants required empathy. The year 2020 and early 2021, when I was writing my dissertation, was difficult for many. My interview and focus group questions revolved around the political conversations that my participants were involved in. As a researcher, I could not approach these conversations from a right/wrong or us/them dichotomous approach; rather, I recognized my own political and often moral positions and practiced mindfulness. I approached my participants from a shared experience of changing spaces, from a rural hometown to a college town, rather than as being right or wrong.

From its onset, as I developed my dissertation topic through writing up the findings, I felt a connection with my study participants. My participants all identified as "rural." They came from rural hometowns to a college campus in the middle of Oklahoma. Their political conversations, the focus of this dissertation, were largely inspired by social media, classroom assignments, and news stories. Many of them were first-time voters. Some held the same beliefs as their parents, and some held differing beliefs. On campus, some of my participants found themselves in groups of friends with a variety of political beliefs, and others found friends who shared the same beliefs. Regardless, a similar theme emerged among my participants. They all described the tension of finding belonging.

As I worked with my participants, and reflected on my personal experiences and time in Oklahoma, I positioned myself as both an insider and an outsider. I grew up in rural Appalachia, and like the experiences of many of my college participants, going away to college exposed me to a variety of political ideas. In many ways, I could position myself as an insider. However, I also had to recognize ways in which I was an outsider; as such, other aspects of my identity were important to recognize as I worked on this dissertation. I am a White, college-educated, multiple-degree-holding, millennial, woman. Several of my participants were Native American, and their experiences of rural-ness were inherently different than my own. My participants came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, and none of them had yet received a college degree, though they were all in college. I also received my primary socialization in a different rural culture. I originally conceptualized “rural-ness” as constituting a unique culture within the United States. In writing this dissertation, spending time with participants, and reflecting on my time spent in Oklahoma, I came to the understanding that the rural Oklahoman experience, created through the passing down of history and traditions, was distinctively different than what I had experienced in Appalachia.

As both an insider and an outsider, I was uniquely positioned to tell the story of political identity transformation in rural Oklahoman college students. My experiences resonated with those of my participants, but they were not the same. Doing this research taught me about balance. If I relied too much on my own experiences, seeking only for my participants to confirm my position, I would not have been able to tell their story. Ultimately, the writing of this dissertation was a great practice of mindfulness. I was forced to be mindful of how my unique identities, values, and beliefs shaped every aspect of my dissertation. It shaped what I decided to write on, the selection of theories on which this study was scaffolded, how I interacted with participants, my relationship with the data, and how I ultimately told my participants’ stories of transformation. I had to recognize the role of self in research.