

# Chapter 25. The Dynamics of Experiencing Multiple Positionalities in Qualitative Research: Reflecting on Relationships with Research Participants

Kristin D. Pickering

TENNESSEE TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

A few years ago, I found myself in the middle of a conflict between my community and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I had lived in this community for about 15 years, and my family and I were familiar with nearby “Grey Cliffs,” a Corps-managed recreational lake area where the community could hike, fish, swim, camp, and even hold baptisms. This area bordered our small farm, and my husband and I, along with two young children, visited this beautiful, beloved geographic space, as well. We attended Fourth of July fireworks celebrations there and enjoyed the beautiful area, along with members of the community. However, we were not fully aware of the environmental damage and criminal activity taking place there and getting worse over time. When we were contacted by a local community grassroots organizer named “Norma” about a town hall meeting being held with the community, Corps, and other government officials to discuss possibly closing the area, we were concerned and wanted to learn more about what was occurring almost literally in our backyard.

At the first town hall meeting that Norma organized, the Resource Manager communicated data and statistics from a sheriff’s report he had received that documented the crime taking place, and he described the details of environmental damage he himself had observed. As the community listened to the Corps narrative, many of them couldn’t help but recall a generally negative relationship with the Corps when it bought out local family farms to build the dam that created the lake many years ago. With this cultural history in mind, the community responded with great hostility to the Resource Manager’s claims about the damage and crime and said they were “lies.” The Resource Manager, surprised by the hostile responses from the community, quickly pivoted and began using modified rhetorical appeals that would reach these community members and motivate them to alter their behavior so that Grey Cliffs could remain open, which is what everyone ultimately wanted.

Observing these changing rhetorical dynamics prompted me to profile this conflict as a book-length case study of ways community members and the Corps as a government organization might work together toward a common goal, despite initially very different value orientations and narratives used to discuss

them. I found myself witnessing the type of dichotomy that Herndl et al. (2018) discussed when referring to differing communication goals between scientists and farmers: While the Corps Resource Manager talked about statistics from the sheriff's report and failure to follow regulations that emphasized his removed role as a "technician" and engineer, the community expressed stories that valued their positive, lived, everyday experiences they had gained through Grey Cliffs' environment, such as teaching children to swim and gathering for family reunions.

I chose the ethnographic, observational case study method because I realized how unique some of these problematic dynamics were: This was my local community where I had lived for many years, with its own personal cultural history with the area and with the Corps. I anticipated that focusing on this case, while highly specific and individualized, could yield information, narratives, and strategies that might help other organizations and communities in conflict, even if all details may not be the same. I also wanted to study specific stories from the Resource Manager and community members. While living in the area, I did not consider myself to have the same history and experiences with Grey Cliffs as community members who had lived here for generations; I wanted to observe and document, making sure all voices in this conflict could be heard.

The goal of my chapter is to explore and complicate the dynamics of managing many different positionalities within one research project, including my own positionality and relationships with community members. I identified as a white woman, community member, academic researcher, a member of what might be considered the middle class, and a relative newcomer compared to other community members who had lived in the area all of their lives. While some of these positionalities I could easily identify and understand, I had difficulty negotiating other positionalities, especially in relation to the community participants I interviewed.

One of these difficulties included an experience I labeled as a failure on my part as a researcher, one pertaining to the female grassroots organizer, Norma, and her treatment by the community. As a female researcher myself, I would have thought before these events that I would not have accepted some community members' characterizations of her uncritically, but that is what I had done. Norma became one of my research participants who generously consented to an interview with me, but before I had a chance to hear her story, I found myself biased by other interviewees' experiences with her, as expressed in their interviews.

In addition, I realized that my embodied experiences at Grey Cliffs differed from those of community members whose families had lived there for generations and that these differing perceptions could impact my research. My embodied positionality in the "pre research phase" was positively connected to this geographic space through creating memories of spending time at a beautiful geographic space and connecting with family. To an even greater degree, those who had lived there for generations had many more positive, embodied experiences at Grey Cliffs, including stories about those experiences that had become part of family histories over a much longer period of time. These experiences

contrasted sharply with the embodied stories of the Corps Research Manager, as he observed the negative impacts of off-roading and collected trash from the lake shore, including needles and syringes as evidence of drug use.

## Listening to and Gaining the Trust of Interviewees as They Told Their Stories

As I listened to community members during the town hall meetings talk about their love for the area, all of the family reunions and baptisms that had been held there, and all of the efforts (such as paving roads) that had built the area into what it is today, I truly empathized with them as they argued for their ability to continue accessing the area. I also found myself empathizing with the Corps of Engineers Resource Manager and also with Norma, as she led the community discussion as a grassroots organizer. Everyone was so passionate about Grey Cliffs: The Resource Manager wanted to protect the area from further environmental damage and crime, and the community didn't want their access to be limited.

After I obtained IRB approval from my institution and officially began collecting data and interviewing community members, I felt that my academic positionality made me an outsider within this predominantly working-class community (similar to what Dunn [2019] describes in her research with white working-class communities of which she was a part), in addition to my lack of generational history the other community members had. I felt privileged in many ways because I had not undergone the hardships this community had experienced with the Corps land takeovers in the 1930s and 1940s, and my family history did not include stories about losing farmland during that time. I also felt distant from community members based on my educational background and institutional work as a professor. However, I believe that I mitigated this outsidership to some degree by actually "being there" as I conducted this ethnographic, observational case study. I had read Rai and Druschke's (2018) essay about "being there" when conducting qualitative research and thought their work tied in to my approach, since I was an involved community member in the conflict, attended all of the community town hall meetings, and allowed myself to be fully absorbed in the events surrounding the conflict while also acting as a researcher. While the characteristics that made me privileged and somewhat of an outsider did not go away just because I was there, my interest and presence appeared to gain the trust of the community members in such a way that they agreed to participate in interviews that became a key part of my book.

The community members appreciated my efforts to document their stories and perspectives as a valued part of my research. Because this community is such a rural one and Grey Cliffs such a remote area, I'm not sure this community had experienced this type of empathy and attention before, especially from someone who was not originally from the area and, as a result, did not already know the cultural-historical background of Grey Cliffs and its community. As I

met with these community members, I explained the goals of my research, along with the informed consent form, and I was surprised that so many agreed to be interviewed. They seemed eager to tell their stories, and my hope was that, even though there were some distancing characteristics between us, the community members could sense my interest in their storied experiences, as Martinez (2020) refers to them. I knew I could learn so much from these community members' own, embodied experiences, as revealed in their narratives.

## Unexpected Reactions to Norma and Enlightening Criticisms

The most complicated and unexpected positionality relationship transpired with one of the community members I interviewed: Norma. Interviewing Norma was essential to my research, from my perspective, because she organized and managed all of the town hall meetings that began the negotiation process between the community and the Corps. Due to health issues, she agreed to an email interview.

Right from the beginning, as I explained my research and the types of questions I was interested in, Norma questioned my research methodology and challenged one of my research questions about the role of emotion in communication. Norma was trained in the sciences, and I believe part of the difference in research orientation related to her training in quantitative research whereas my ethnographic, qualitative research explored a lot of different perspectives. My intention in my work was to highlight multiple cultural views, attending to themes and questions as they emerged and revising them as I progressed. From my perspective, I was only at the data gathering stage, although I was using guided questions in the semi-structured interviews. Only after future reflection and analysis did I realize myself exactly what themes were growing out of my research. In retrospect, I wondered if this different research orientation seemed very foreign to Norma, who was likely trained to highlight more controlled and focused research questions from the outset, given her more quantitative research background.

In addition, conducting the interview by email was probably not the best medium, since Norma may have intended her comments to be benign and observational, but I interpreted some of her criticisms as hostile toward my research design (or somewhat of a lack of one, at that point). I was puzzled by her critique of my research to begin with, since we were from different fields and were not really collaborating beyond the interview. Regardless of her objections, Norma consented to participate in the research, and some of her email responses to me sounded frustrated as she narrated her experiences of trying to rally the community behind the causes she thought the community should be focused on in this conflict, mainly that the community should create a nonprofit organization because that was the only type of organization that could negotiate legally with the Corps. Both Norma's in-person and email demeanors were strong, opinionated, and somewhat combative, from my perspective. Looking back on the

interviews, I realize that part of her demeanor was simply reflecting her discouragement resulting from trying to lead a community to act, and the community ultimately had rejected her leadership.

With this interview experience fresh in my mind, I then continued conducting face-to-face interviews with the other community members I had recruited, a couple of whom were male community members who “took over” after Norma retreated to a back-seat role, due to the community’s rejection. As I interviewed these community members, I found myself agreeing with and identifying with their reactions to Norma’s strong, opinionated, and curt persona; while some interviewees had supported Norma, a few of them did not take kindly to her ethos, and, without fully thinking through the complexities of the communication dynamics going on in the town hall meetings, I accepted and agreed with these community members’ characterizations of Norma because they resonated somewhat with the demeanor I encountered during my email interview with her.

I wrote a chapter in my book that focused on Norma’s leadership role, and in it, I presented her rejection as “status quo,” since my interactions with Norma were similar to the ones some of the community members had. Months later, I received feedback on my manuscript draft, and both reviewers thought I could complicate my discussion of Norma, rather than present her in what they viewed as an unflattering, reductive manner. I had not initially thought of my treatment of Norma as reductive, but one of the reviewers said that they couldn’t help but think Norma would not be pleased with how I had presented her in the chapter and that, even if some of the community reactions to her were justified, those reactions should be presented more objectively, rather than as conclusions I had drawn. This reviewer also made a point that hinted at something I had not fully considered in my desire to finish the manuscript: I was thinking of the interview more as a process that was completed, but the impact of my representation of the interview could extend beyond my initial writing about it. Norma might read my work and object to my unflattering portrayal of her. While her statements may have contributed to my construction of her persona in my mind, the reviewer cautioned against my non-objective view of her, which seemed to be influenced by my other interviewees. Conveying what the interviewees had said was one thing, but allowing that feedback to contribute to my interpretation and representation of Norma in my discussion of her could be judged as biased by others.

As I considered the manuscript reviewers’ feedback, I realized that, while I had spent much time and space in the manuscript expanding on the Corps Resource Manager’s values and community values that impacted all participants involved in this conflict, I had not done the same for Norma. Plus, I had completely ignored the possibility that “environmental sexism,” which I had learned about from reviewing sources such as Gaard (2018), MacGregor (2021), and Taylor (2014), could be impacting how we all viewed Norma’s role as a grassroots organizer. I felt humbled by the reviewers’ feedback and suggestions and used their comments as an opportunity to analyze Norma’s values in depth and discuss the unfortunate dynamics of

her rejection. I saw these constructive criticisms as ways to complicate my positionality not only in relation to Norma but in relation to the other community members' perspectives, as well, as I continued to revise my manuscript.

## A Growing Understanding of Multiple Positionalities

I'm happy to say that the Corps and community were able to reach an informal agreement about how to manage Grey Cliffs to allow for environmental rejuvenation as well as continued community access. Now that the conflict has been resolved and the book project has been completed, I find myself continuing to reflect on positionality dynamics related to this work. I am grateful to have become somewhat of an insider to this community's despair of possibly losing access to a beloved geographic space that meant so much to them. However, I continue to feel some dissonance as I realize that my perspective on these community members' stories may not ever be a "true" representation of their ideas and voices, even though I have tried to foreground their voices and words as much as possible. By believing community members and documenting their stories through my book, my positionality as researcher helped them trust me as I attempted to legitimate their stories, beliefs, and hopes in ways I'm not sure would have been possible otherwise. Even though uncomfortable, these varied, "messy" positionality dynamics were worth engaging. Being willing to try to navigate these different identities provided so many opportunities to learn and understand than I ever would have gained if I had not found the courage to at least try.

## References

- Dunn, T. R. (2019). *Talking white trash: Mediated representations and lived experiences of white working-class people*. Routledge.
- Gaard, G. (2018). *Critical ecofeminism*. Lexington Books.
- Herndl, C. G., Hopton, S. B., Cutlip, L., Polush, E. Y., Cruse, R., & Shelley, M. (2018). What's a farm? The languages of space and place. In C. Rai & C. G. Druschke (Eds.), *Field rhetoric: Ethnography, ecology, and engagement in the places of persuasion* (pp. 61-94). The University of Alabama Press.
- MacGregor, S. (2021). Gender matters in environmental justice. In B. Coolsaet (Ed.), *Environmental justice: Key issues* (pp. 234-248). Routledge.
- Martinez, A. Y. (2020). *Counterstory: The rhetoric and writing of critical race theory*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Rai, C., & Druschke, C. G. (2018). On being there: An introduction to studying rhetoric in the field. In C. Rai & C. G. Druschke (Eds.), *Field rhetoric: Ethnography, ecology, and engagement in the places of persuasion* (pp. 1-21). The University of Alabama Press.
- Taylor, D. (2014). *The state of diversity in environmental organizations: Mainstream NGOs, foundations, government agencies*. Green 2.0.