

# Chapter 50. Flailings and Failings: Managing Emotions and Balancing Perspectives as an Emerging Researcher

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In my 2023 dissertation, “Transmodal zine-making with resettled refugee youth,” I knew it was important to name my positionality, particularly as a white, adult, U.S. citizen who has never been a refugee, working alongside BIPOC refugee-background teens. My goal, though, was never to be the focal point of the study; given that refugee teens are often ignored as experts on their own experiences, I wanted to center my participants’ artwork and perceptions over mine. In that, I was successful, but it came at the cost of more holistically owning my relationality to the participants in ways beyond superficial asides. In this snapshot, I use a framework of flailings and failings to grapple with questions around how and to what extent my own body and voice as a researcher was and should be present in my research alongside refugee youth.

One aspect I identify as a flailing—different from a failing because there was an attempt at self-reflexivity—was writing about my own embodied experience of being a graduate student conducting an IRB-backed empirical study for the first time and being quite nervous for my first interview. My anxiety was compounded because I knew this student’s family used one phone, which I was tying up for 60-90 minutes, and I wasn’t sure whether a Dari interpreter would be available for the call. As a result, I didn’t follow up on her initial responses, allowing her to provide relatively surface-level answers, and ignoring the questions these responses prompted in my mind, yielding data that was much sparser than that of the following two participants. In writing reflexively about this flailing in my dissertation itself, I was able to mark my own self and embodied emotionality as present in the study.

On the other hand, I failed to name my positionality or embodied emotionality on numerous occasions. Out of fear of centering myself, I sometimes hid myself entirely from the narrative. The metaphor I return to time and again is one of stepping to the side and shining a spotlight on, or turning up the microphone of, refugee-background youth who choose to share their stories and art. However, as any post-structural researcher would contend, there is simply no way to remove oneself from the narrative. I ultimately made a number of decisions on how to curate my participants’ work, how to interpret their art, and how to make sense of their interview feedback in a cohesive narrative in my dissertation. However, I did not name this, or the inherent power dynamics within it, potentially replicating the very silencing structures I sought to counter.

Moving forward, I still don't have any concrete answers. I know others' stories are not mine to tell, and that the work I do is deeply relational; there's no way for me to tell my story without including the relationships I've built. I've flailed and failed to acknowledge aspects of my own positionality and embodied emotionality, and I suspect that trend will continue as I keep striving for a better balance in representing my own role in the research I conduct. Graduate students and early career researchers are fighting compounded narratives—including imposter syndrome, mentor relationships, and a difficult job market—that portray failure as something to be avoided or pre-empted. If I've learned one thing, it's to lean into the failings and flailings, the messy and embodied emotions, instead; they are, perhaps, our greatest teachers.