

Reflecting on discomfort in research

*Feelings of discomfort can arise in research, especially research that works across differences in social power and status. In this post **Rachelle Chadwick** discusses the role of discomfort in research methods and how recognising and 'staying with' discomfort can positively shape qualitative research methods.*

I'll start with a confession: I didn't want to write this blog post. Diving into reflections on discomfort, i.e. those moments of dislocation and dizzying disorientation that make you question the world, yourself, and all your cosy and familiar truths, is not fun or enjoyable. It's a risky endeavour. You are aware that some might mock this kind of piece and dismiss it as gratuitous 'navel-gazing'. Others will say (dismissively) that you are just centering yourself and your 'feelings'. So, to be honest, instead of being excited, the thought of writing this piece made me want to run away. I even 'forgot' about the invitation for a while.

Of course, this is precisely what discomfort does: it generates avoidance and denial. It is a feeling or affective sensibility that orients and directs us in particular ways, often towards the path of least resistance (i.e. escape). And the bigger point is that discomfort is not just an affective texture that is part of our personal lives, it is also a feeling that makes its way into our academic and fieldwork encounters. It is an *actant* in research practices, i.e. it does things; it steers and shapes our interactions and ideas in various directions; it turns us 'on' or 'off' to certain lines of thinking, interpretation, and making sense. As a result, dwelling on discomfort is an important part of reflexive and critical qualitative research practices; it is also a central component of what Adale Sholock calls '[methodologies of the privileged](#)', that is: methodological approaches that refuse systematic ignorances linked (in particular) to whiteness and other modes of social and material privilege.

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In a [recent paper](#) I wanted to explore how discomfort can shape research practices and knowledge production processes. My argument is that discomfort is not simply an uncomfortable feeling to be 'filed away', ignored, or dismissed as extraneous noise. It is an affective intensity that can either 'close down' questions and dialogue (often resulting in the reiteration of normativity), or it can potentially open up space to confront and challenge the lure of comfortable ignorances. As such, it is potentially an important resource for anti-colonial and resistant forms of knowledge production. In my paper, I build on the work of feminist theorists such as Claire Hemmings, Sara Ahmed, and Adale Sholock, who have theorised dissonance and discomfort as key to the development of feminist consciousness and politics, as well as the rich contributions of feminist postcolonial and post-qualitative theorists to debates about reflexivity, difference, and methodological politics. Taking up Hemmings' argument that [idealizations of empathy](#) within research potentially risk minimizing and erasing differences, I explore the significance of moments of disruption and disconnection for research praxis. By reflecting on some of my own fieldwork experiences in the South African context, I argue that 'staying with' ([Haraway, 2016](#)) discomforts and disconnections, and framing them as central to research praxis, is an important part of efforts to refuse the 'flattening' or erasure of differences. It also contributes to us being accountable for what we come to write, claim, know, and conclude.



In my case, feelings of discomfort and disconnection were often linked to racial and class differences between myself (a middle-class, white woman) and research participants (although not always). My fieldwork took me from some of the richest mansions along the Cape coastline, to the comfort of middle-class suburban homes, and dusty tin shacks perched on treeless dunes in tightly packed informal settlements. I often felt out-of-place in unfamiliar environments as I navigated unknown terrain. Despite having lived in Cape Town for most of my life, persistent racialized inequalities have resulted in continued spatial and geomaterial divides between traditionally white suburbs and informal settlements. In these neighbourhoods there are very few white faces (either as residents or visitors). As a result, I stood out conspicuously on my research visits to informal settlements; people stared at me. I often got lost. There were also times when I felt unsafe as I moved alone through unfamiliar territory. As a result, my fieldwork was permeated with many uncomfortable moments, both as I tried to navigate strange terrain and while talking with women with very different lives from my own. Some of these encounters shook me to my core, resulting in a profound sense of disorientation. At times, I felt helpless and was filled with a sense of dread, guilt, and pessimism. After such encounters, I often turned away, trying to disengage from these feelings, and would at times avoid engaging with certain stories and interviews because of my fear of having to (once again) confront disturbing, uncomfortable, and disruptive feelings. In some cases, it took years for me to return to certain stories, as I slowly found a way of framing and theorising my own reluctances and becoming accountable (as far as possible) to my own blindspots and ignorances.

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Dwelling on the meanings of discomfort for research and analytic work means confronting the ways in which we (as researchers) and our research participants are inevitably positioned in relation to histories of domination, systematic oppression, coloniality, and inequality. As researchers, we are not neutral but carry the weight of historical, sociopolitical, and geomaterial relations of power into our interview and fieldwork encounters. We often feel and experience these heavy legacies or structures as embodied feelings of discomfort, guilt, distress, dislocation, or disconnection. If we ignore or avoid these feelings, we miss valuable opportunities to contextualize the complexities of knowledge production and be accountable for our research. This applies not only to qualitative inquiry but to all forms of research that are concerned with social justice. Across methodological and disciplinary divides, we must problematize that which is comfortable, engage messy discomforts, and work (as academic-activists) to change social relations of inequality and injustice.

Confronting feelings of discomfort is key to enacting ethical modes of interpretive practice in which we 'dwell on' the ways certain encounters, places, or participants make us feel. These feelings are not irrelevant but important interpretive resources in working towards accountability for our interpretations, analytic, and research conclusions. However, our first instinct is often to recoil and retreat from discomfort. We often prefer to wallow in what philosophers have called '[wilful ignorance](#)', avoiding the substantive and transformative work of acknowledging social inequalities and historical injustices and working to transform them. My paper is thus a call for us as critical qualitative and feminist researchers to take note of discomfort and dwell on the the meanings of these feelings for our research projects. This means confronting painful and uncomfortable truths and refusing the epistemic laziness that works to keep the integrity of our comfortable and privileged worlds intact.

*This post draws on the author's article, [On the politics of discomfort](#), published in *Feminist Theory*.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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