



**Standing in the Middle: Insider/Outsider Positionality
While Conducting Qualitative Research With Opposing
Military Veteran Political Groups**

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Abstract

This case study describes the process and challenges of conducting qualitative research on two opposing military veteran political groups: Iraq Veterans Against the War and Vets for Freedom. The discussion is based on a dissertation project that compelled me to reflect on my simultaneous “insider” status as a military veteran and “outsider” status as a non-member of both veteran political groups. I describe negotiating my positionality throughout the research cycle, as I also shifted from trying to be “objective” to embracing the fluidity of my own identity and political views.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand the difficulties of negotiating positionality as an insider and outsider when conducting qualitative research on opposing political groups
- Understand the challenges associated with conducting qualitative research on military veterans
- Understand the balance between building rapport and trust with interview participants while maintaining distance as a researcher

Insider/Outsider Positionality and Qualitative Research

Over the past four decades, an extensive discussion has emerged about objectivity and positionality when conducting qualitative research.¹ Across the numerous disciplines that use qualitative methods, researchers have reflected on the impact of researcher–subject relationships on the research process and its outcomes.² A vibrant debate continues around the question of whether “insiders”—researchers who share a similar background as the group they are studying—have an advantage in collecting qualitative data over “outsiders” who do not share similar backgrounds or experiences with the group under study. Over the years, this debate has shifted from analyzing positionality as a binary question of insider versus outsider to a more constructivist perspective that recognizes a broader range or continuum of researcher–subject relationships, influenced by the numerous, fluid identities of, both, researchers and research participants themselves.

Positionality and the insider/outsider debate in qualitative research has been ongoing since the 1960s and 1970s for a reason: it strikes a chord with, and raises meaningful questions for, qualitative researchers.³ Even scholars who describe “insider” and “outsider” as relatively

defined statuses occupied by researchers acknowledge that there are degrees of insider-ness and outsider-ness, often without stringent or clear boundaries. The insider/outsider debate is also consistent with “emic” versus “etic” perspectives where the “insider” researcher is better positioned to develop theory from the ground up (emic), rather than from an “outsider” top-down approach of applying theory to qualitative data (etic). What is missing from discussions of reflexivity on insider/outsider positionality, however, is an analysis of *political* insiderness/outsiderness and the variability of an achieved status during the research process. Studies of positionality in qualitative research focus almost exclusively on the researcher’s fixed insider/outsider ascribed status (i.e., race, class, and gender) during fieldwork and data collection.⁴ In contrast, few studies examine the significance and fluidity of achieved statuses such as political organizer, community leader, and volunteer.⁵ In this case study, I address this lacuna by reflexively analyzing the variability of my own positionality as a military veteran conducting ethnographic research with opposing Iraq War veteran political groups.

Research Practicalities

My research with opposing political groups began with the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. I was completing an undergraduate degree in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and political protests leading up to the invasion of Iraq were prominent on the Berkeley campus. As a Berkeley sociology student and former U.S. Marine who had recently left active duty, my feelings toward the Iraq War were mixed about whether or not I opposed the invasion. Although I personally opposed invading Iraq, I also felt highly motivated to re-enter military service and join my comrades who were preparing to deploy to war. Anti-war protesters struck me as too far removed from the experiences of being a soldier, but I also felt that those advocating war failed to understand the sacrifices they were demanding of soldiers. After completing undergraduate studies, I entered graduate school at the University of Michigan in 2004 and soon thereafter was amazed to encounter an anti-war demonstration sponsored by military veterans. This was when I learned of veteran anti-war organizations such as Veterans for Peace (VFP), Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), and later Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), as well as veteran organizations in support of the war such as the Gathering of Eagles (GOE) and Vets for Freedom (VFF). I was intrigued by both war supporters and anti-war activists with prior military service. The relationship that I later developed to both opposing political groups sparked the research that I pursued for my doctoral studies in sociology.

The in-depth interviews for this study began in 2008 with Vietnam veteran members of the anti-war organizations VFP and VVAW. I later interviewed members of the GOE—a Vietnam veteran organization in support of the Iraq war. These interviews led to further interviews with veterans

from the Iraq War who were in support or in opposition of the war. In contrast to Vietnam Veterans, in-depth interviews with Iraq War veteran political activists felt much closer to my own experiences of military service as interviewees were much closer to me in age and had served either during or immediately after the period in which I served in the military. Indeed, I had even served in the Marine Corps with some of my interview participants.

The Context of Studying Military Veterans

The military is a society within a society. Goffman (1961) identified the military as a “total institution” wherein “a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (p. xiii). Hence, unlike in ordinary social arrangements of a modern society where one typically sleeps, plays, and works in separate social spheres, total institutions break down these barriers. As Goffman (1961) argues, “various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution” (p. 6). Through their experience of military service, a unique bond is created among veterans which often makes them feel misunderstood by, and suspicious of, outsiders. Consequently, as Moelker (2015) notes, researchers seeking to conduct research with veteran groups must grapple with “obtaining organizational entry, winning trust, and balancing involvement and detachment” (p. 105).

The Fieldwork

Even with my prior service in the Marine Corps, access to veteran political organizations was by no means automatic. The military is suspicious of outsiders, and this carries into the culture of veteran political organizations. In addition, as part of their political activism, many veterans in this study had already conducted several interviews about their position toward the Iraq War with various media outlets. Given their outspoken stance toward the war, one might have expected scheduling an interview to be a seamless process. However, several veterans in this study were no longer participating in interviews because they had come to feel that journalists misrepresented their views and misquoted them.

Gaining Access to Anti-War Veterans

I first gained access to members of IVAW when I was invited to the 2008 Winter Soldier Investigation⁶ in College Park, Maryland, by a VVAW member whom I interviewed. At the time, I was actually focused on interviewing Vietnam War veterans and had only begun to consider the possibility of including Iraq War veterans in the study. At the Winter Soldier event, however, I was struck by how similar my experience of military service was to those who had served in

Iraq. Although I did not serve in Iraq, I did serve in the Middle East for 15 months prior to the invasion. Moreover, I was either the same age or slightly older than the IVAW members I met at the event, and their stories of camaraderie, attitudes toward military leaders, and contemporary military jargon resonated deeply with me. Following the Winter Soldier gathering, I was convinced that my research required an in-depth study of the processes of politicization for Iraq War veterans.

I initially began contacting IVAW members through the personal email addresses they listed on the organization's website. When this did not work, I was informed by an IVAW member that the best way to contact members was through Facebook. This approach proved to be much more successful, reminding me that when trying to conduct research with young people, researchers must keep up with the latest forms of technological communication. Ironically, even the use of Facebook would likely be outdated by now, as so many young people have reportedly moved on to other platforms.⁷ At the same time, gaining access to subjects through social networking introduces important challenges for the researcher's presentation of self. Because I was conducting research on groups on opposite sides of a political issue, my personal views toward the war and who I was "friends" with on Facebook could be—and, indeed, were—accessed by members of both groups. Maintaining objectivity with my online presentation of self was incredibly important to avoid compromising my access to either political group. As I discuss below, I sometimes needed to assure participants in the interviews that I wasn't interested in taking "sides," but the point here is that this kind of work began even before meeting with subjects face-to-face.

Gaining Access to Pro-Mission Veterans

Access to the pro-mission⁸ organization VFF began with my earlier interviews with Vietnam veteran members of the organization GOE. Upon completing an interview and learning more about me, one Vietnam veteran interviewee put me in contact with a retired Colonel under whose command I served while a platoon sergeant in the Marine Corps. After I contacted him and told him about my research, the retired Colonel not only agreed to participate in the study but also sent an email to the VFF listserv telling members about my project and letting them know that I was "a straight shooter" and former Marine who had served under his command. As a retired Marine Colonel, his sponsorship of my research provided a tremendous level of credibility among pro-mission veterans. In particular, the Colonel's gesture of support was instrumental in helping me to secure an interview with the president of VFF.

Similarly, the Oklahoma state chapter president for VFF was a former Marine who gathered a group of members to interview with me because he "wanted to help out a fellow Marine." And at

the annual VFP meetings in 2008 and 2009, I conducted interviews with Anti-Iraq War veterans who vouched for me as a military veteran. Hierarchy remains incredibly important to military veterans, so interviewing senior members of the organizational hierarchy first and then having them vouch for me and for the study were invaluable. Thus, I learned that as qualitative researchers we need to recognize that the process of snowball sampling is multi-dimensional and not just about one name leading to another but about relations of trust.

Planning the Trips

Due to limited funding, I clustered my interviews at group meetings, rallies, and other key organizational events such as the VFP annual meeting and monthly state chapter meetings throughout the country. After receiving permission from each respective organization, I contacted members individually to tell them when I planned to be at meetings and to schedule interview times. As much as possible, I would try to cluster multiple interviews together to make the most of both my limited time on certain trips and my limited budget. During one 2-day trip to Oklahoma City, for example, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with six members of VFF at a member's apartment, largely thanks to the help of the above-mentioned Oklahoma City VFF state chapter president. Such trips also demonstrated my willingness to meet subjects where it was convenient for them, and in environments where they felt comfortable, around other like-minded people. Opportunities to conduct interviews during group gatherings also provided a social space for being sensitive to the idea that talking about their military experiences might be difficult for some vets and thus not something to just ask about in an inappropriate or unexpected setting, potentially triggering unpleasant memories. Working with and through organizational schedules and spaces, I was able to ensure interviews were as convenient and comfortable as possible for interviewees.

The Interview Process

Negotiating my insider/outsider positionality during my research on Iraq War veteran political groups actually began when I attended the Winter Soldier Investigation in College Park, Maryland, before even scheduling my first interview. The event itself was well publicized and covered extensively by the independent media. IVAW members gave testimonies about their experiences in Iraq, which included several incidents of war crimes committed by the U.S. military, cases of sexual harassment, and dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. The event itself took place inside of the main auditorium of the National Labor College and in addition to veterans giving testimonies about their experiences, the event functioned as a large organizing and strategic meeting where IVAW members prepared and voted on mission statements, collective actions, and charted new ways to move the organization forward.

Meanwhile, across the street from the National Labor College, members of VFF and the GOE staged a counter-demonstration against the Winter Soldier Investigation waving American flags, calling anti-war veterans traitors, and attracting media attention. As a researcher, I was intrigued by both groups, but found myself standing in the middle, carefully negotiating my positionality and being cautious not to appear aligned with either group. Whether my speaking to political activists on both sides of the issue created any questions about my intentions is unknown to me. Throughout the research process, I felt equally accepted by both groups, but I remained an outsider to both political organizations. During the Winter Soldier event, I inadvertently crossed a boundary at one point when I attempted to sit-in on a closed IVAW meeting and one of my interviewees respectfully asked me to leave.

Throughout the process of conducting interviews with members of IVAW and VFF, I learned to constantly negotiate my status as a veteran and my empathy toward participants' political stance toward the war. Although some interviewees did not ask about my political position, others were interested to know whether or not I supported their views. This careful balance was continuously negotiated from the moment I contacted interviewees through the completion of the interview. Thus, I ensured interviewees that the goal of the research project was to understand how veterans developed and arrived to their political views, not a study to find out which group is more "correct" in their political stance. Nonetheless, when a few interviewees persisted in wanting to know my own political views toward the war, my direct reply was honest: I opposed the invasion of Iraq, but I also felt a strong desire to join my friends who were still in the military and fighting there. In addition, I disclosed that a very close friend who served in the Marine Corps with me and had recently returned from Iraq had committed suicide, making my views toward the war much more complex. Ultimately, my anxieties about walking a political tightrope between support and opposition to the war became less relevant as the interviews progressed. By the end of many interviews, veterans themselves expressed that although their political views were important to them, it was telling the story of their experiences in Iraq that was paramount.

Lessons learned from conducting this research are as follows:

- *Be flexible.* Political activists are incredibly busy, so be prepared to conduct an interview at any time, particularly during organizational events, and in spaces/places/times when they feel comfortable.
- *Embrace your insider/outsider positionality.* Although you may feel that you share much in common with your participants, you are still an outsider who is conducting research and writing about them. Use this as an opportunity to ask participants questions that they assume you already know.

- *Don't be discouraged.* During some interviews, it may seem that the interviewee is not engaged. I once left an interview where the participant did not say very much, and I thought it was a complete waste of time, but during my analysis I found this participant to have some of the richest data, which I later published.

Data Processing and Analysis

Handling Qualitative Data

I conducted a total of 68 in-depth interviews and 16 months of participant observation at group rallies, meetings, and social gatherings. I also met informally with veterans at coffee shops, bars, restaurants, and college campuses during my fieldwork. With a grant from The Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy, I was able to hire a transcriptionist to transcribe all of my interviews. I would send the transcriptionist batches of interviews, and upon receiving the transcriptions, I would compare them with my fieldwork and post-interview notes. The data were then stored on the University of Michigan's secure electronic storage space where I cataloged interviews by interview date and organizational affiliation. This storage process proved incredibly useful when I later began my data analysis.

Qualitative Data Analysis Software

I now use NVivo qualitative software, but in 2010 when I began conducting the analysis for this project, I was using MAX Qualitative Data Analysis software. At the time, I felt that MAX had fewer bells and whistles than NVivo, and therefore was more efficient to navigate. In MAX, I used a grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987) to search for themes that emerged regarding how veterans arrived at their political views. At the same time, I found it incredibly useful to re-listen to interviews while reading their transcripts to capture tone of voice and recreate the social context. Listening to the transcript while coding also reminded me of the interview location, how the interviewee looked, was dressed, and their disposition during the interview.

Although using qualitative data analysis software is incredibly useful for organizing and making sense of complex qualitative data, I continuously felt my own positionality ebb and flow while creating themes and coding. The more politically liberal side of me remained opposed to the war and empathized with anti-war veterans, but at the same time, the military veteran in me completely understood pro-mission veterans who felt a deep sense of duty to remain in Iraq. I worked vigorously to create themes and find patterns in the data that were objective, but I finally decided to embrace the fluidity of my insider and outsider positionality. I realized that to do otherwise would disregard the fact that as qualitative interviewers we influence our participants by our own ascribed and achieved statuses. I came to think of positionality less as

an insider/outsider binary than as a dynamic continuum that shifts throughout the entire research cycle.

Making Sense of It All

Conducting fieldwork on opposing political groups was essential for understanding how people who experienced similar events emerged, nonetheless, with widely divergent views. If I had only conducted interviews with pro-mission veterans, I would have captured only the strong sense of duty that compelled them to join the military, how their experiences in Iraq reinforced that sense of duty, and how that sense of duty was carried into their narratives of political activism as civilians. Alternatively, if I had only interviewed anti-war veterans, I would have captured only the disjuncture that some veterans arguably experienced in Iraq when those experiences did not align with their purpose for volunteering for military service. By interviewing oppositional groups, I was able to compare these experiences and perspectives and gain important insights as a result. Doing so, particularly given the nature of qualitative research, raised unique challenges and required me to negotiate my own positionality and inherent bias, yet the results, I feel, were well worth it.

Take-Home Messages

I ventured into this study believing that, as a military veteran, I would automatically win the trust of my research participants and therefore establishing access and rapport would be relatively easy. While being a veteran myself did help with establishing credibility, access to these organizations was by no means automatic. Members of both political groups had previously conducted interviews with some news journalists who they felt misrepresented their arguments. In addition, due to their tight bonds and protective in-group dynamics, they remained skeptical of outsiders contacting them who were not part of their respective political organization. This forced me to be more conscious of my own political views and approach my interviews from a more genuine standpoint of simply wanting to learn about their unique experiences. A more inductive interviewer standpoint revealed greater complexity about the participants' background and their lives beyond their political views. Some important lessons about positionality for future studies on opposing political groups were also learned:

- *Do not assume groups will automatically accept you.* Regardless of your connections to the group, political activists are often skeptical of people writing about them, especially if they have felt misrepresented by previous interviewers.
- *Share your background.* Commonalities can help build rapport, but more importantly, sharing your background—even if that means disclosing differences—builds mutual trust.
- *Be genuine.* Approach your participants with honest inquiry. You are there to learn from

them and hear their stories regardless of their point of view.

- *Be open to statements that make you feel uncomfortable.* Participants may often make statements that you do not agree with. Your job is not to criticize their views, but rather to learn how they arrived at this position.
- *Be conscious of your online presence.* Several participants will look you up online to learn about your background and political views.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. To read more about objectivity and positionality when conducting qualitative research, see Beoku-Betts (1994), Collins (1986), Merton (1972), and Zinn (1979).
2. For more on diverse disciplines analyzing researcher–researched relationships, see Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008), Berger (2015), and Blythe, Wikles, Jackson, and Halcomb (2013).
3. Merton (1972) is largely credited as the first sociologist to rigorously take up the subject of insiders and outsiders in qualitative research arguing that we are all both insiders and outsiders. However, Zinn (1979) critiques Merton for disregarding the social context within which research takes place, which sparked the debate that continues to this day.
4. Most recently, researchers (Hawkins, 2010; Obasi, 2014; Razon & Ross, 2012) have discussed in great detail the influence of their ascribed statuses on the research process.
5. A few examples of examining the influence of achieved status include Blythe et al. (2013), Edmonds-Cady (2012), and McNess, Arthur, and Crossley (2015).
6. Winter Soldier was an event in 2008 where Iraq War veterans provided accounts of their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and where several veterans described serious war crimes that they witnessed and participated in.
7. See Kagel (2014).
8. Members of Vets for Freedom self-identity as “pro-mission” rather than “pro-war” veterans.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. In comparing oppositional groups, what is the puzzle that you are trying to figure out? What are participants' commonalities and mechanisms that influenced their divergent points of view?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of comparing groups with oppositional points of view?
3. What are some of the ethical problems the researcher can encounter when conducting research on opposing political groups?
4. How could the researcher's own political bias negatively affect the data evaluation and findings? How can you address other forms of bias that may arise during the research cycle?
5. How can you design a qualitative research proposal that considers your own relationship and insider/outsider relationship to research participants?

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