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Moments of discomfort: rethinking reflexivity and researcher subjectivities through affect and poststructuralism

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Carr, M. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6772-958X (2026) Moments of discomfort: rethinking reflexivity and researcher subjectivities through affect and poststructuralism. Gender, Work & Organization, 33 (2). pp. 483-494. ISSN 1468-0432 doi: 10.1111/gwao.70057 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/125316/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70057

Publisher: Wiley

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Moments of Discomfort: Rethinking Reflexivity and Researcher Subjectivities Through Affect and Poststructuralism

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Received: 8 September 2023 | **Revised:** 29 September 2025 | **Accepted:** 21 October 2025

Keywords: affect | discomfort | poststructuralism | power | reflexivity | subjectivities

ABSTRACT

This article examines how discomfort, as an embodied and affective experience, can be theorized through poststructuralist reflexivity to deepen feminist understandings of researcher subjectivity and power in qualitative research. I present two vignettes as illustrative of moments of discomfort conducting research "in the field" which I argue create a sense of unease when shifting subjectivities and regimes of power become more visible. I draw on affective methodologies and poststructural analysis to present a methodology of discomfort. The article offers two contributions: first, it introduces a dual-framework approach that combines affective analysis with poststructural discourse to explore researcher subjectivity and power dynamics. Second, the article provides empirical insights into how moments of discomfort can serve as critical junctures for reflexive inquiry, enriching feminist methodologies in qualitative research.

1 | Introduction

Reflexivity has long been established as a core practice within qualitative research, central to feminist methodologies that interrogate how knowledge, power, and subjectivity are produced (Finlay 2002; Haraway 1988; Cunliffe 2003). Yet despite its prominence, reflexivity is often limited to accounts of researcher bias or positionality that position power as flowing unidirectionally from researcher to researched (Pillow 2003; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). Such accounts risk reproducing static notions of subjectivity and underplaying the affective, embodied, and shifting dynamics of research encounters (Gilmore and Kenny 2015; Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023). Recent scholarship has begun to challenge these limitations by calling for more situated, multidirectional and embodied accounts of reflexivity (Plester et al. 2022; Hales and Paul 2023). However, there remains a lack of methodological tools for grappling with the messiness, unease, and multiplicity that characterize qualitative research relationships (Lambotte and Meunier 2013).

This article argues that moments of discomfort provide a critical entry point for theorizing researcher subjectivity and power. Discomfort is a thread that weaves throughout the feminist and critical management literature, albeit conceptualized from different ontological perspectives. These "reflexivities of discomfort" (Pillow 2003; see also Chadwick 2021) have been "named" as being "struck" (Corlett 2013; Cunliffe 2004), "unknowing" (Allen 2017), "uncomfortable" (Pillow 2003; Dosekun 2015), "sticky" (Riach 2009), or as "awkward" moments in the messiness of research (Cunliffe 2003; Hurd and Singh 2021). Discomfort, whether experienced as unease, awkwardness, or dissonance, can illuminate shifting power relations and unsettled subjectivities that are often underexplored through conventional reflexive practices (Pillow 2003; Riach 2009; Chadwick 2021). I present vignettes from my research diaries when I felt moments of discomfort, which I reflect upon within this article. I argue discomfort provides a juncture that illuminates regimes of truth and power and allows reflection on how subjectivity is constituted in research. I develop a methodological

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framework that integrates poststructuralist reflexivity (Foucault 1988; Butler 2011; Dosekun 2015) with affective approaches (Ahmed 2017; Knudsen and Stage 2016), conceptualizing discomfort as both an embodied experience and a site of unfolding discursive power. This dual lens enables a richer engagement with the politics of reflexivity, moving beyond researcher-centered accounts to consider how subjectivities are co-constituted through affect, discourse, and power relations. As such, the article specifically seeks to address: how can discomfort, as an embodied and affective experience, be theorized through poststructuralist reflexivity to deepen feminist understandings of researcher subjectivity and power in qualitative research?

The article makes two contributions to feminist qualitative research. First, it advances reflexive methodology by proposing a dual-framework approach that combines affective analysis with poststructural discourse, responding to calls for multidimensional reflexive tools that capture the complexity of subjectivities in the research process (Alvesson et al. 2008; Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023). Second, it provides empirical insights into how discomfort can operate as an opportunity for reflexive inquiry, by drawing on vignettes from fieldwork in two contrasting organizational settings: a corporate bank and a multi-level marketing company. In situating discomfort as a methodological resource, the article demonstrates how feminist researchers can critically engage with shifting regimes of power and subjectivity in qualitative research (Corlett and Mavin 2018; Chadwick 2021).

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin by outlining debates on reflexivity, with particular attention to poststructuralist perspectives and affective methodologies. I then present the methodological protocol through which I analyze moments of discomfort. Two vignettes are offered as illustrative "worked examples" of how discomfort can be theorized through the integration of affect and poststructural analysis. I conclude by discussing the methodological and feminist implications of discomfort as a reflexive practice.

2 | Reflexivity Reconsidered: Critiques, Limits and Possibilities

Reflexivity involves critically examining one's own beliefs, judgments, and practices throughout the research process, acknowledging their cultural and social influences, as well as the underlying power structures and values that shape the research (Finlay 2002; Bott 2010; Cunliffe 2003). In "turning back" on oneself (Steier 1995, 163), the researcher's role, assumptions and decisions are interrogated, challenging the construction of knowledge and social research as "objective" and "rational" (Haraway 1988). Reflexive practices span epistemological positions, representation and truth, positionality, and power relations (Corlett and Mavin 2018). Scholars have classified the contributions and limitations of different approaches to reflexivity (Lynch 2000; Finlay 2002; Finlay and Gough 2008; Mortari 2015; Corlett 2013). This has highlighted a diverse body of work that nonetheless shares recognition of "social reality as being constructed, rather than discovered, during research" (Alvesson et al. 2008, 480).

Reflexivity has become so central to qualitative research and to academic discussions of knowledge production that it is often "expected" within qualitative research (Subramani 2019; Charmaz 2014; Charmaz and Mitchell 1996; Alvesson et al. 2008). It has been positioned as a default measure of legitimacy in qualitative research, while oversimplifying complex research experiences, and lacking accountability and engagement with ethics (Pillow 2003; Lynch 2000; Alvesson et al. 2008). Reflexivity has, for example, been asserted as a solution for researchers to "transcend" their own subjectivity, cultural context, and ethnocentrism (Pillow 2003, 186), risking producing what Denzin (1997, 226) refers to as "narcissistic texts."

Addressing these problems, recent reflexive practice has called for challenging dominant discourses, power structures, and social norms (Hurd and Singh 2021). Such work has, for example, re-examined reflexivity from viewpoints including how gender is socially constructed through research and reflexivity (Adamson 2014; Pullen 2006; Hales and Paul 2023), and how masculinity is "written" into the research process (Plester et al. 2022). The dominance of neo-positivistic, scientific, and masculine research methodologies often does not reflect the messiness of research, which is rarely neat, logical and as systematic as suggested in the way it is subsequently written and presented (Lambotte and Meunier 2013). Rather, as feminist qualitative researchers, we are embodied within the research, constituted within power relations and through shifting subjectivities. However, as Gilmore and Kenny (2015) argue, reflexive descriptions of power relations between the researcher and the researched tend to be oversimplistic, with emotions downplayed or centered on the research subject rather than the researcher.

Reflexive scholarship to date has often been unidirectional, focusing primarily on the researcher as the holder of power within the research relationship (Pillow 2003; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018), reinforcing the idea that power flows solely from the researcher to the participant. Yet, research encounters show fluidity, with subjectivity continually reshaped through interactions, emotions, and discourse (Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023; McCorkel and Myers 2003). As qualitative researchers in the field, we can experience "sticky moments" (Riach 2009) that leave us vulnerable and scrutinized (Caretta and Carolina Jokinen 2017; Whitson 2017; Helin 2019). Reflexive approaches must therefore foreground shifting subjectivities (Hoskins 2015; Plester et al. 2022; Chadwick 2021), recognizing research as a site of power negotiation and identity reconstitution (Dosekun 2015; Hales and Paul 2023).

Despite this recognition, methodological tools or frameworks that can adequately capture the dynamic and shifting nature of reflexive practice remain limited. One notable exception to this is Rodriguez and Ridgway (2023), who conceptualize intersectional reflexivity, acknowledging how intersecting identities shape relationships, highlighting discomfort, privilege, and disadvantage. Through drawing on their own experiences as ethnic minority researchers, they explore intersectional reflexivity to challenge the unidimensional view of unequal power and how subject positions are constantly being renegotiated. Similarly, Alvesson et al. (2008) provide a methodological tool that challenges the unidirectional view of reflexivity by

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conceptualizing the range of reflexive practices within qualitative research. They identify multiple reflexive practices: multiple-voicing practices, which acknowledge the researcher's role in constructing texts; positioning practices, which locate the researcher's viewpoint within a broader social landscape; and destabilizing practices, drawing on Foucault and Derrida to challenge notions of truth. By highlighting these diverse approaches, they caution against the risk of categorization that privileges one perspective over another, advocating instead for combining different reflexive approaches to raise new questions and address existing criticisms of reflexive practice.

Together, this scholarship points to the need for multidimensional tools that interrogate how power and subjectivity are co-constituted. Drawing on diverse reflexive approaches brings opportunities for a more nuanced and multidimensional tool for examining researcher subjectivity. This calls for a framework to enable scholars to interrogate how power and subjectivity are co-constituted within research relationships, offering a richer and more critically engaged reflexive practice. One opportunity to do so comes through drawing on moments of discomfort. During field research, I felt moments of discomfort, which I reflect upon within this article. Existing approaches typically theorize discomfort through either affect or poststructural perspectives; here, I weave them into a methodology of discomfort. I argue discomfort provides a juncture that illuminates regimes of truth and power and allows reflection on how subjectivity is constituted in research.

Before presenting this methodology of discomfort, the next section turns to poststructural reflexivity, examining how subjectivities and power relations are constituted through discourse, before moving on to consider affect, discomfort and reflexivity.

3 | Post-Structural Reflexivity and Subjectivity

Poststructural reflexivity examines subjectivities and power relations, offering an opportunity to critically examine how things are constructed as "real" or "truth" within society (McNay 1992). The poststructuralist turn recognized that the research process itself performatively constitutes subjects and objects (Davies et al. 2004; Youdell 2006; Dosekun 2015). Performativity is the "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler 2011, xii). In research, practices such as naming and counting bring objects or subjects into being, making them appear as existing prior rather than performative effects of the research (Dosekun 2015). Poststructuralist reflexivity focuses, therefore, on "not *who* the researcher and research are but *how* they are reproduced in these terms" (Youdell 2006, 63, emphasis in original).

Poststructuralism proposes a subjectivity continually reconstituted in discourse every time we speak (Weedon 1997, 32). Poststructural research thus involves deconstructing the performativity of one's research practice. Turning poststructuralist analysis back onto the researcher as a form of poststructural reflexivity can illuminate regimes of truth and power and show how subjectivity is constituted within the research process. Yet, as Dosekun (2015), 436) highlights, "complex questions remain about how one is to actually 'do reflexivity' or 'be reflexive', especially in line with poststructural theoretical principles." Pillow (2003, 188) does not seek to answer this question directly but offers examples of "uncomfortable reflexivity—a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous." For Dosekun (2015), the aim of "uncomfortable reflexivity" is not to validate or provide neat solutions, but to "confound and interrupt [...] to resist regimes of truth" (Dosekun 2015, 436).

The challenge of poststructural research is how to describe the world while also challenging the categories and language available to do so. Focusing on discourse risks overlooking the material and embodied dimensions of subjectivity. In privileging language, poststructural reflexivity may underplay how bodies and affective experiences shape research encounters. Notions such as "uncomfortable reflexivity" highlight the emotional labor of self-positioning, yet poststructural reflexivity engages little with the affective dimensions of reflexive practice. One possibility, which may serve as an entry point to consider researcher subjectivity, is by drawing on affect and discomfort, which I turn to next.

4 | Affect, Discomfort and Reflexivity

One opportunity to consider how we are constituted in the research process comes through examining moments of discomfort. Attending to discomfort may offer a way to analyze how subjectivities are constituted through the research process. Acknowledging discomfort means recognizing feelings of dissonance, dislocation, and unease that arise during research encounters, fieldwork, and analysis. It is therefore unsurprising that research on discomfort often does so from an embodied and/or affective perspective. Chadwick (2021, 557 emphasis in original) draws on feminist affect theory to define discomfort as "both a visceral and relational intensity, feeling, or sensation *and* a 'sweaty concept' (Ahmed 2017) that is good to think with."

Feelings are the tools or "data" of affective methodologies (Knudsen and Stage 2016). For Chadwick (2021), "gut feeling"; being aware of our affective responses and bodily sensations, such as feelings of discomfort, unease, or resonance, are an important aspect of feminist research praxis. These gut feelings serve as interpretive nodes and analytic resources that can inform the research process and generate new insights. Engaging with gut feeling resists the production of hierarchical and dominant forms of knowledge and power relations. Chadwick (2021, 563) calls for us to "stay with" discomfort, dwelling on its texture, implications, viscerality and resonances'.

Others have also drawn on emotion work that takes place in the field. Schmidt et al. (2023) use the term "awkwardness" instead of discomfort, treating it as an analytical juncture. They suggest that reflecting on moments of awkwardness can provide insights into the emotions and relational concepts that emerge in research relationships. They present awkwardness as a relational experience that arises when social expectations are disrupted in the researcher–participant relationship. Awkwardness is characterized by a sense of discomfort and a feeling of "I do not want to feel this" or "I should not feel this" (Schmidt

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et al. 2023, 15). It is an embodied experience that arises from a discrepancy between the researcher's feelings, desired feelings, and imagined feelings. Riach (2009) describes "sticky" moments where conventional dialogue between the participant and researcher were disrupted. Hong et al. (2017) advocate exploring moments of tension. Tension draws on the inherent conflicts and challenges that arise between the voices of the researcher and those being researched (Hong et al. 2017). They offer a framework for analysis which starts with seeking out unease and discomfort, involving researchers and research participants in ongoing dialogue, and embracing multiple perspectives on a range of tensions during the data analysis process. Here, discomfort becomes a methodological approach: reflexively seeking out places of unease, uncertainty, and tension in the data rather than pursuing certainty of meaning and fixed conclusions.

Discomfort highlights the disconnect between our embodied self and the social norms and values imposed on us, opening space to question and challenge normative truths and knowledge production. By staying with discomfort, researchers can engage with alternative ways of knowing and resist reproducing dominant forms of knowledge. Discomfort is experienced and addressed differently depending on one's social location and identity. The "politics of discomfort" (Chadwick 2021) are shaped by privilege and intersecting power dynamics (see also Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023). Embodied and affective approaches recognize that research and data analysis are messy and multifaceted, and that discomfort can be a productive space for grappling with the complexities of the research subject matter (Pavlidis et al. 2025). Affective methodologies provide a gateway to conceptualizing naming and bringing discomfort into being. From here, researchers can start with the felt experience of discomfort, trace its discursive and affective contours, and move toward a poststructural analysis of how power, knowledge, and subjectivity circulate in research encounters.

To summarize, while affective and embodied approaches foreground emotions and sensations as central to research encounters (Ahmed 2017; Chadwick 2021), poststructuralist reflexivity interrogates how subjectivities are constituted through discourse and power relations (Foucault 1988, 2008; Butler 2011; Dosekun 2015). Combining these perspectives offers a more dynamic way of understanding researcher subjectivity, not simply as an emotional or embodied experience, but as something continually produced through power, discourse, and affective intensities. This integration is particularly valuable for feminist scholars seeking to move beyond individualized accounts of reflexivity toward a more structural and relational analysis of power in research encounters.

5 | Moving Toward a Methodology of Discomfort

In the following section, I present a research protocol of how others may draw on both embodied, affective, and poststructural approaches to reflect on subjectivities and power. After outlining the reflexive process, I present the two vignettes as "worked examples" of how discomfort can be theorized through the integration of affect and poststructural analysis.

5.1 | Analytical Approach

The aim of this article is to unfold how discomfort, as an embodied and affective experience, can be theorized through poststructuralist reflexivity to deepen feminist understandings of researcher subjectivity and power in qualitative research. To do so. I engaged with the reflexive process through several distinct phases.

The starting point was to identify moments that resonated due to a sense of discomfort. Initially, I read and re-read my research diaries written during my doctoral research and reflected on my feelings during these interviews, observations, and events that I attended as part of my ethnographic data collection. In doing so, I drew on affective approaches to think about moments of unease. While reading through my research diaries, I paid close attention to the moments which felt "awkward." Looking for affective responses, I engaged with the feelings of discomfort, that were felt bodily. At this point, I wrote these moments as vignettes, which I experienced as cathartic, constructing them as free-flowing writing and used as a way to place myself, the researcher, as an actor in the "play" (Butler 1997; Humphreys 2005; Liu 2018). The vignettes are used to provide a "vivid portrayal of the conduct of everyday life" (Erickson 1986, 149) and are selected as examples of discomfort during research.

In writing the vignettes, I drew inspiration from Liu's (2018) autoethnographical inquiry of her experiences in the academy. However, the aim of this article is not autoethnographical. There were multiple vignettes that I could have selected; however, the two selected provide illustrative "worked examples" of the analytical process adopted. The vignettes are presented as a methodological tool to unfold reflexivities of discomfort; their purpose is not to claim better representation of the research participants or indeed us as researchers, but rather to convey moments that left me with a sense of unease (Seymour 2022). The vignettes are not the "truth" of the events, as the goal is not to presume the discovery of truth (Haynes 2011; Liu 2018) but instead have an element of what Liu (2018) refers to as fictualization, told in a way that captures the feelings and emotional experiences.

I also recognize here what Liu (2018) refers to as rallying the courage to tell her story. I reflect how, in putting these vignettes to the page, I feel vulnerable in writing myself into the research. I seek courage by hoping this article resonates with other researchers. After crafting the vignettes, I re-read them again and I noted these as affective responses and captured them in words which were, in many ways, inadequate to reflect what was felt viscerally. I reflected on the feelings I experience. How did I feel this in my body? How did this stay with me, and what impact did it have?

The final stage was to draw upon poststructural approaches to reflect on both the vignettes and the affective responses to these moments of discomfort. In this process, I considered what I was feeling, the trigger, context and events surrounding this feeling, and what dynamics were in play. Here, I reflected on power and what broader discourses were possibly being brought into being. My primary analytic focus is poststructural, which typically does not provide a set of practices that can be considered a "method"

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(Gannon and Davies 2012). Rather, poststructural theory often turns to discourse as the primary site for analysis. Discourses are complex interconnections of being, thinking, and acting. They are constantly changing; historically, culturally, temporally and spatially located (Foucault 1970, 1984). Discourse analysis can be approached from a "top–down" perspective focusing on broader issues, often of power, ideology and knowledge, or a "bottom–up" approach of linguistic practice approaches to discourse analysis (Edwards and Potter 1992). Here, I adopt a top-down approach where discourses are "sets of statements that construct objects and an array of subject positions" (Parker 1994, 245), which, when taken up, have consequences for subjectivity and experience. Individuals are constituted within this multitude of discursive practices; there is "no pre-discursive rational self, existing outside of or apart from discourse" (Gannon and Davies 2012, 74). Dominant discourses privilege those with power and create social realities that become "common sense"; difficult to see as they are so ingrained.

Discourse can extend beyond language to other forms of textual analysis, which can be on a macro-level, for example, capitalism, feminism, Marxism etc., or at a more micro level, incorporating interviews or indeed bodies and space. "Deconstructing" these texts by taking them apart and showing how they present us provides insight into the way discourse constructs our experience and thus enables us to challenge it (Burr 2015). Post-structural discourse analysis selects any site of meaning as a form of text for analysis; thus, a multitude of sources beyond speech can be used as a textual analysis, for example, adverts, bodies, or architecture. The site of analysis that I selected for analysis is vignettes taken from my doctoral research diaries. Names in the vignettes have been altered to maintain anonymity.

Figure 1 summarizes this analytics process that moves from affect and embodiment to discourse and power.

6 | Moments of Discomfort and Shifting Subjectivities

I turn to present two illustrative vignettes chosen as they personally resonated as something uncomfortable, they had a certain significance and sense of heightened awareness. Drawn from fieldwork in two organizations, these moments stood out for their significance and sense of unease. The first site was a multinational bank in the UK, where I interviewed women in middle to senior management roles. This setting felt familiar, as I had worked with financial service organizations during my career and brought tacit knowledge of their structures and hierarchies. The second site was a multi-level marketing company, where distributors work as freelancers selling products while recruiting others to their teams (Biggart 1989). Multi-level marketing is precarious work, with many distributors failing to make a living wage (Shade 2018). Here, I conducted around 40 h of participant observation by becoming a distributor and attending sales meetings, team meetings, and networking events. This organizational form, more akin to gig work and with 70% of distributors being women, stood in stark contrast to the corporate bank.

In both settings, I kept detailed observation notes capturing conversations and reflexive thoughts (Wolfinger 2002). I acknowledge, however, that these notes inevitably reflect "background knowledge or tacit beliefs" (Wolfinger 2002, 93), as data is constructed through what is recorded and what is left out. To illustrate the reflexive process used, after each vignette, I discuss my affective response and then consider this through a poststructural lens to reflect on my subjectivity within research and power relations.

7 | Vignette 1: First Meeting With the Bank Project Sponsor "Simon"

> Access to the bank and the women managers comes through a colleague who puts me in contact with "Simon," a director at the bank, who she describes as "supportive of promoting more women within his team." After an email exchange, we arranged to meet at his office. The emails are brief and formal without niceties: just "Melissa" in the initial line, no "Dear" or "Hi," "kind regards" etc. I copy this approach in my email exchange back, but it feels odd for me, and I imagine Simon to be austere and perfunctory.

> On the agreed meeting day, I'm met at reception by the Director's personal assistant who leads me up to one of the higher floors in the building. We make small talk in the lift about the traffic. The Director's office is situated at the far end of an open-plan floor in a glass box along one of the far walls. As I walk across the open-plan area, I notice firstly that there is a good balance of men and women, I'm surprised as I was envisaging more men, and secondly that people are casually dressed. It is "dress down Friday" and I'm wearing a suit which I dragged from the back of my wardrobe earlier. I feel conspicuously overdressed and hence very visible as I walk through this area. In my shoes (which I never normally wear heels, why today?) I'm 5ft 10, which increases my sense of visibility. I feel like I am play-acting at this role, like a caricature corporate woman, a costume I used to blend in, but then I got caught out.

> I'm shown into the office by the PA, and Simon comes around the desk to shake my hand. I see him look slightly surprised for a minute, and I wonder if I'm not what he expected. So, what did he expect? He's about the same age as me, but shorter than me, and everything about him is precise and pristine. The conversation somehow quickly turns to his career, and he is surprisingly open and unguarded. He tells me that the bank "isn't for him"; he's been told he needs to be more "cut-throat" to get ahead. Simon is ex-military,

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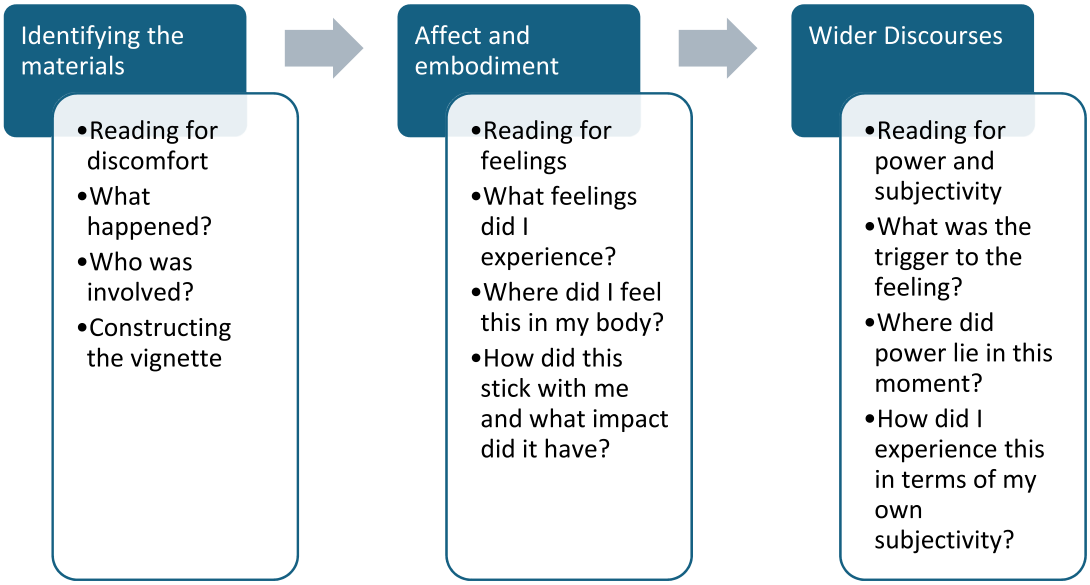

FIGURE 1 | Analytic process.

> white, married and personifies a form of hegemonic masculinity that makes me wonder what "more cut-throat" looks like in this environment if he doesn't fit the mould. I wasn't expecting the director to start telling me how unhappy he is at the bank, and I feel like part coach, part sympathetic wife. As I smile and nod sympathetically, and I feel very uncomfortable, there is something within the exchange that creates a sense of unease. I mention the term "gender champions" and he picks this up, self-identifying as one and reiterating a couple of times that is how he sees himself.

> After discussing my research, he opens his office door and beckons three women from his team into the office and introduces them. They are all junior managers and report directly to him. He explains the project to them and that I will be in contact. I am mute as he explains it, and they are too. We all look at him, smiling and passive. I note that he claims authority in this situation. He asserts himself as the facilitator and enabler of this conversation and my access to the women. The meeting is closed with him saying he will forward the women's email addresses to me. It is clear he will be the point of contact and enabler of this research.

This experience in my research resonated as a moment of discomfort; it left a sense of unease that extended beyond the meeting. Reflecting on my interaction with Simon, the bank director, through the interplay of affect and poststructural reflexive approaches to power provides opportunities to consider my subjectivity in this moment. By applying two analytical lenses, affect and embodied reflexivity and poststructural reflexivity, I deconstruct these moments of discomfort and their implications for my experience as a researcher.

7.1 | Affect and Embodied Reflexivity: Navigating Emotional and Physical Discomfort

Reading the vignette as a text allows an opportunity to turn one's reflective gaze back on itself, focusing on discourse and its constitutive effects. By first reading the vignette and my discomfort in this moment from a lens of affect, several different points of unease emerge. The initial email exchanges with Simon felt notably terse and devoid of customary pleasantries, setting an anticipatory tone of formality. In my notes, I described how this tone heightened my sense of discomfort before the meeting. Upon arriving at the bank, most of the employees were casually dressed. In contrast, I noted in my diary how my own formal suit made me feel overdressed and conspicuous. Wearing heels elevated my height to 5′10″, which I reflected on as further amplifying my sense of visibility and self-consciousness. These embodied sensations of discomfort highlight how emotional responses are deeply intertwined with physical presence.

The architecture of the office further contributed to my unease. The office was open-plan, and Simon's office was a glass box visible across the floor. In my notes, I describe the long walk across floor as making me feel both exposed and marginalized. Later reflection led to interpreting this spatial arrangement as an "affective infrastructure" (Bosworth 2023), where the physical environment evokes an emotional response deeply tied to power relations. The glass office, symbolizing transparency and surveillance; while positioning Simon as authoritative, left me feeling scrutinized.

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Feminist scholars emphasize that emotions and bodily experiences are integral to the research process, as they reveal underlying power structures and social norms. Hemmings' (2012) concept of "affective dissonance" illustrates how conflicting emotions can prompt critical reflection and feminist curiosity, leading to a deeper understanding of gendered dynamics in professional settings. Reflecting on the moments in which I experienced an embodied discomfort through a poststructuralist approach provides an opportunity to consider the wider discourse through which this discomfort was felt.

7.2 | Poststructural Reflexivity: Deconstructing Discursive Constructions of Subjectivity

In my fieldnotes, I recorded the long walk to the glass office, the desk behind which the director sat, and the curt and perfunctory email exchange. I interpret these as discursive objects of power that positioned me as both subordinate and Other, an embodied feminine researcher within the masculine corporate setting. I did not belong.

My dress, chosen to blend into corporate norms, instead reinforced my sense of otherness. Davies et al. (2006, 99) suggest that where subjection and mastery co-exist, "co-existence is made starkly visible by the (un)expected interruption to the moment of mastery." I recognize this here, where my sense of mastery as a professional woman drawing on discourses of acceptable corporate dress (Kelan 2013) was interrupted.

A feeling of discomfort arose with shifting discourses that created a sense of switching subjectivities. During the conversation, the director spoke about his problems and in my notes, I described how I felt positioned as a sympathetic listening ear. I reflected later that this intimacy of hearing Simon's problems draws on discourses of femininity; sympathetic, listening, and supportive, which presented a subject position from which it appears that opportunities for action are closed; what could be said and done becomes limited. When the other women entered the room, I felt a shift in discourse from being positioned as a sympathetic listening ear to a move in power where the director positions himself as the enabler and facilitator of this feminist piece of research. In my notes, I recorded unease: the women in the room were mute, and I smiled and nodded agreeably.

I felt that I needed Simon's approval to gain access to women in the corporate bank, which seemed insurmountable without his help. Yet here is a man governing this feminist research. Later, I interpreted the tension in this dynamic. The director, in presenting himself as a "gender champion," draws on a patriarchal discourse and the gender binary. On the one hand, he is the paternalistic protector of the women who need his help and support, but on the other, he is the gatekeeper who can govern, monitor and control this. He was the gatekeeper, and thus discomfort stemmed from this sense of powerlessness. As a researcher, what could be said and done within these subject positions felt very limited, creating the unease and discomfort that this experience left behind.

8 | Vignette 2: Attending a Multi-Level Marketing Recruitment Event for New Distributors

> I meet Louise (my contact at the multilevel marketing organisation) in the café area of the hotel. There are lots of women there, all kissing each other like old friends. When Louise introduces me to people, they kiss me on the cheek and tell me how excited they are that I am there, which surprises me and leaves me unsure how to respond. I feel like I want to believe them, but I wonder if they are just seeing me as a potential customer. We go up to the room where music is playing—high impact, high energy music and people are talking loudly. I'm struck that there are men there as I was expecting all women. I'm also struck by the clothes the men are wearing; in my diary I write, "snappy dressers and the shoes!" One man has bright blue leather shoes with pony skin on the top part, while another man is dressed in a jacket of a vivid checked pattern. The women aren't the Instagram, Kim Kardashian-styled, glamorous women I expected; they are very diverse in terms of age and appearance, and Louise whispers to me that these women are "serial entrepreneurs, savvy women."

> The guest speakers for the day are a husband-and-wife team who are "blue diamonds," the multi-level marketing elite. Their presentation feels carefully scripted like a double act, so that "Izzie" is the bossy wife running the event and her husband "Jay" is her comedy fall guy. Izzie is a tiny, glamorous woman in her early 30s. She's wearing a white, tight dress quite like one a beautician would wear (strange on a cold November day) and towering Christian Louboutin heels.

> Izzie leads the presentation and does 90% of the talking. Izzie describes her motivation to become involved in the multi-level marketing organisation as giving her "time with her kids," and Jay says it was "the money" with a wink to the audience. Izzie gives an eye roll to the audience who laugh. Izzie appears to be the driving force, and Jay is there to make the men feel comfortable. The presentation is laced with sexual innuendo, and Jay shouts "Yeah" at full volume whenever money is mentioned. There is a lot of pseudo-science with pictures of scientists flashed on the screen (all men) who invented these "life-changing" beauty products.

> Izzie explains that when she was deciding whether to become a distributor, she wanted to know more about the financial credibility of the company. She says, "I

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> ask the one person I trusted most, I have real trust in my daddy." She explains that her "daddy" researched the business and explained it to her; my daddy knows what this is … I just say, "oh that's nice" (said with high childlike voice and big eyes). I feel my eyes flicking between Izzie and Jay and the audience, and I wonder what they are all thinking. Later, she talks about her son and cries. Jay is mute throughout this and offers no comfort when she cries.

> After the pitch, Louise introduces me and Anya; another of her guests" (potential distributors), to a team elite leader at the organization. Anya is German, early 30s, married with a young child. I hover awkwardly on the outside of the conversation. Anya keeps apologising for her appearance and her "no makeup face." The team elite says, "I love this woman, I can feel her energy." The next day Louise calls me, hugely enthusiastic, and asks me what I think. I tell her I really enjoyed it.

I have selected this experience as a moment of discomfort that left a lingering unease. Multi-level marketing organizations often promote themselves as an emancipatory force, promising to free women from "9–5" occupations and enabling them to earn while balancing home and family life. When Louise whispered to me in a reverential way that the women were "serial entrepreneurs, savvy business women," they were constituted through the discourse of the enterprising self, where individuals are positioned as free agents working within the market to develop themselves as their own form of human capital. Yet this obscures the precarious and gendered nature of multi-level marketing work (Carr and Kelan 2023; Sullivan and Delaney 2017), and part of my discomfort stemmed from recognizing the organizational realities of this business model.

8.1 | Affect and Embodied Reflexivity: Emotional Responses and Physical Sensations

I observed the initial warmth and enthusiasm of the women at the event, expressed through affectionate cheek kisses and excited welcomes. In my notes, I recorded how these gestures elicited a complex emotional response. While they suggested genuine friendliness, I also felt an undercurrent of skepticism, leading to self-reflection on whether commercial interests motivated the distributors' enthusiasm.

As my eyes flicked between Izzie, Jay and the audience, I noted a sense of an illusion in which potential distributors were being "sold" an experience with high-energy music, symbols of success in the expensive clothes, dazzling shoes, and talk of balancing family life while earning significant commission. Reflecting on this, I felt voyeuristic watching this performance. Within my body, I experienced a sense of unease; the tension lay between knowing I was judging Izzie, being critical of her, yet sensing I should feel solidarity toward other women. In my diary, I wrote that my silence and lack of challenge cast me as a co-conspirator, while my critical observations and judgments "hovering on the edge of conversations" made me feel like a failed feminist, constructing power relations between myself as a researcher and the women. I felt caught in the middle of two subject positions limited by what I felt could be said and done in either position.

Observing the guest speakers, Izzie and Jay, introduced a layer of discomfort. I note how Izzie's presence, paired with her glamorous attire, a white, form-fitting dress and towering Christian Louboutin heels, seemed incongruent with the event's setting in a local hotel. Her role in the presentation, interspersed with humor and sexual innuendo, positioned Jay in a comedic light. In reflecting on this performance, I recorded a range of emotions, from amusement to discomfort, as I grappled with the performative aspects of their partnership.

8.2 | Poststructural Reflexivity: Deconstructing Discourses of Gender, Power, and Identity

In my diary, I described the internal dialogue this event provoked, as I became aware of my own biases and preconceptions. Reflecting later, I recognized how my background and beliefs influenced my perceptions. Recognizing this allowed me to acknowledge the subjective lens through which I viewed the event. Much of my discomfort revolved around Izzie and how she is constructed through discourse. When I observed her referring to "asking her Daddy," in a child-like voice, I noted how this infantilized her and positioned her as incapable of understanding the financial side of the business. Analytically, I draw on Gill and Orgad (2015) who show how infantilizing metaphors become a mode of self-regulation that gives women the illusion of being in control while avoiding critiquing the structures which perpetuate gender inequalities. In this case, I interpret Izzie's "Daddy" references as validating her and making her acceptable as a viable subject within patriarchal discourse. Infantilizing discourse constructs Izzie as a child-like woman who likes beauty products (read femininity) and refers financial matters (read masculinity) to her father. Thus, infantilizing becomes a form of protection which "does not challenge patriarchal gaze and asymmetric power relations" (Gill and Orgad 2017, 30).

I also observed Izzie's choice of tight dress and expensive designer high heels linked sexualized femininity, consumerism, and financial success. Analytically, I interpret this as performativity constituting her as viable through a form of "sexual entrepreneurialism" (Harvey and Gill 2011, 56). Jay, meanwhile, made Izzie the comedy straight guy to his jokes and innuendo, and was mute when she cried about their child, as if childcare is not part of his reality.

Reflecting on my own reactions, I noted the discomfort of watching these dynamics creates a tension. Although I am intellectually aware of this performativity of gender, I felt complicit in perpetuating an element of "girlfriend gaze"

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(Winch 2013), where women and girls police each other's looks and behaviors. My judgment of the other women made me feel uncomfortable, yet I wanted to blend in and to belong. This produced a voyeuristic sensation: I felt simultaneously one and Other; identified as a woman but failing in this form of hyper-femininity. It is in this space of discomfort that I argue subjectivities become most visible, and regimes of truth and power illuminate how I am constituted and constituting others within the research process.

9 | Discussion

This article addresses the question: how can discomfort, as an embodied and affective experience, be theorized through post-structuralist reflexivity to deepen feminist understandings of researcher subjectivity and power in qualitative research? By examining moments of discomfort within my research practice, first through an affective lens to uncover feelings and embodied responses, followed by a poststructural discourse approach, I have demonstrated how such instances can illuminate the complex interplay of power dynamics and subjectivities inherent in the research process. This two-step approach enriches our understanding of the performativity of research and highlights the complex ways in which researchers' identities are constructed and transformed through discourse.

In writing about discomfort, I first acknowledge that I do so from a position of privilege as a white, middle-class, middle-aged woman. My experiences are far from universal and must be situated within what Sholock (2012) terms "methodologies of privilege": anti-racist (white) feminist methods of working, reflecting, researching and writing. Inspired by Chadwick (2021, 559), I attempt to engage reflexivity not to secure legitimacy but as a way of critically interrogating my own positionality, emotions, and assumptions.

My entry into academia was relatively late, at the age of 47, after a career in leadership development and executive education. These experiences positioned me both as an insider, fluent in the codes and practices of corporate life, and an outsider, often one of the few women in the room and critical of the practices I witnessed. This dual positioning shaped the emergence of discomfort in the field and my subsequent attempts to theorize it. As Pillow (2003) reminds us, reflexivity cannot provide closure or neat solutions; rather, it can expose the limits of what we know and how we come to know it.

The vignettes from my doctoral research illustrate how moments of discomfort arose when dominant discourse stood uncomfortably next to the way in which I am more commonly construed. Bott (2010) argues that as women academics, our work lives are supposedly "gender-free," in other words, "womanhood should not be a significant feature of our working identity" (Bott 2010, 170) yet, "in the field" we are marked in terms of gender. While I would not argue that academia, or indeed any social interaction, can be "gender-free," in these vignettes, I found a sense of personal discomfort when my subjectivity was reconstituted in a way that created unease.

In the bank vignette, I sensed a shifting discourse from a sympathetic listener to being subordinated by Simon, the director, whose authority operated both discursively and materially. Here, patriarchal privilege and organizational gatekeeping structured what could be said and done. In Liu's (2018) autoethnographical account of working as a research fellow at a leadership research center, she describes the center director as the "resident patriarch", instructing women on the appropriateness of their gendered performance. My encounter resonates with this: Simon's positioning of himself as a "gender champion" at once facilitated my access and constrained my agency. Reflexivity here is not about acknowledging bias or "being transparent" (cf. Finlay 2002; Lynch 2000), but about tracing how subjectivities are constituted in shifting and uncomfortable ways. The unease I experienced exposes what Corlett and Mavin (2018) call the ongoing negotiation of power and identity in research relationships.

The multi-level marketing vignette illustrates a different discomfort, embedded in the interplay of femininity, esthetic labor, and entrepreneurialism and obscuring the reality of precarious labor. Multi-level marketing organizations often present themselves as emancipatory spaces where women can "have it all," earning money while balancing family life. Yet, as Shade (2018) shows, these promises hide the instability and gendered inequalities of this work.

Watching Izzie perform hyper-femininity through wearing a tight dress, designer heels, and using sexualized humor, brought me face-to-face with my own embodied discomfort. In casting a critical eye on Izzie and how my own sense of femininity is positioned in relation to her, I can unfold my own biases in how femininity should be "done." I have constructed an image of myself from my professional corporate background, and Izzie's hyper form of femininity does not sit well with me. I found discomfort through a sense of failing femininity (Gill 2007; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008) through which I am brought into being (Tyler 2011).

At the same time, I recognized in my notes how I was complicit in perpetuating what (Winch 2013) calls the "girlfriend gaze," where women police one another's looks and behaviors. Reflexivity here meant acknowledging not only my emotions but also the discourses through which I was positioned and through which I positioned others. Gilmore and Kenny (2015) remind us that reflexive accounts often underplay emotion; my analysis shows that emotion is not a distraction but a constitutive force that shapes subjectivities and power relations. These two vignettes demonstrate the value of discomfort as a methodological resource. Reflexivity is often criticized for becoming formulaic, reduced to declarations of bias or positionality that legitimize research rather than unsettle it (Lynch 2000; Pillow 2003). Scholars such as Finlay (2002) and Alvesson et al. (2008) have called for more nuanced approaches that combine diverse traditions of reflexive practice.

The article responds to these calls by offering two contributions: first, it introduces a dual-framework approach that combines affective analysis with poststructural reflexivity. Affective analysis foregrounds how embodied sensations and

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emotions mark research encounters, while poststructural analysis deconstructs how discourses constitute subjectivities. Taken together, they illuminate not only how power circulates in the field but also how researchers themselves are drawn into its flows. In doing so, the article contributes to Alvesson et al. (2008) call for reflexive approaches that draw on different epistemological traditions within reflexivity to offer multi-dimensional tools for examining researcher subjectivity. This enables us to move beyond seeing power within reflexivity as unidimensional to consider how, as researchers, our subjectivities are also constituted through the research process.

Second, the article provides empirical insights into how moments of discomfort can serve as critical junctures for reflexive inquiry, thereby enriching feminist methodologies in qualitative research. Integrating affect and poststructural approaches to reflexivity offers researchers a structured framework to critically engage with discomfort, transforming it from a personal feeling into a site of epistemological inquiry. This process aligns with the concept of reflexivity as a tool for emancipation, encouraging researchers to reflect on how their identities and power relations shape knowledge production (Pillow 2003). Similarly, Rodriguez and Ridgway (2023) highlight how intersectional reflexivity allows researchers to explore the complexities of their identities and the power structures they navigate, leading to more ethical and insightful research. Additionally, this approach equips researchers with a theoretical lens to comprehend how power operates through both discourse and affect. By acknowledging the emotional dimensions of research interactions, scholars can gain deeper insights into the relational aspects of knowledge creation (Corlett and Mavin 2018).

These contributions underscore the importance of embracing discomfort as a generative force that can illuminate the complexities of identity, power, and knowledge production in research contexts. Combining poststructuralism and affect theory enables researchers to uncover hidden power structures within research encounters. This dual approach highlights how power operates through discourse, shaping whose knowledge is legitimized and whose is marginalized.

The feminist contribution of this work is to re-center discomfort as a generative force in qualitative research. Discomfort unsettles tidy narratives of objectivity and coherence, exposing the messiness of research relationships (Lambotte and Meunier 2013). It compels us to confront our complicity in reproducing power relations, whether through silence in the corporate setting or critical judgment in the multi-level marketing context. For feminist scholars, this means resisting the instrumentalization of reflexivity as an ethical checkbox and embracing it as an ongoing practice of critique. Reflexivity through discomfort allows us to interrogate the affective and discursive structures that shape our own subjectivities, while remaining attentive to how these structures reproduce privilege and marginalization. In doing so, it contributes to feminist methodologies that seek not only to document inequality but also to disrupt the regimes of truth through which it is maintained (Haraway 1988; Dosekun 2015).

10 | Conclusion

Reflexivity through discomfort presents epistemological and practical challenges for the researcher. When I reflect, for example, on the experience of sitting in the director's office in the bank, I visualize the women sitting quietly and neatly, with hands folded on laps, while the director stands behind his desk, a symbol of power and masculinity. This is possibly an adapted recollection; a tableau I have constructed within my memory which represents how I "read" the performativity of gender in this moment. This demonstrates a challenge for reflexivity, as Davies et al. (2004, 362) argue, if gaze is constitutive, then in being both the object gazed at and the conductor of the reflexive gaze becomes "slippery." Reflexivity must therefore be a site for innovation where we catch ourselves using the old modes of meaning and seek to disrupt them.

By extending methodologies of discomfort, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the regimes of truth, power, and the discursive frameworks through which subjectivities are produced. Dosekun (2015) reminds us that reflexivity is not about looking harder but about interrogating the lenses through which we view, as these "spaces of constructed visibility" shape our perceptions and constitute power/knowledge. A methodology of discomfort enhances individual research practices while also advancing feminist debates about the politics of knowledge production.

Existing reflexive practices, particularly those centered on discomfort, risk either individualizing researcher emotions or treating reflexivity as a form of ethical reassurance that reinforces authority. Instead, this article argues for discomfort as a site of epistemic and methodological resistance. Embodied sensations and discursive constructions must be read together if we are to move beyond researcher-centric accounts. A feminist reflexivity of discomfort, informed by affect theory and poststructuralist critiques, offers a way to engage more deeply with how knowledge is produced, contested, and disrupted.

Together, these perspectives advocate for a multidimensional reflexive practice that accounts for affective, embodied, and discursive aspects of research. Such an approach allows feminist scholars to better understand how research itself becomes a site of power negotiation and identity reconstitution. To stay with discomfort is to stay with power: both in how it constitutes us, and in how we might resist it.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Elisabeth Kelan for her supervision, support and guidance during my doctoral research and for her thoughtful critique of an earlier draft of this manuscript.

Funding

The author has nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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