**The Evergreen State College**

**Graduate Program on the Environment**

### Thesis Prospectus

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| **Name** | **Robyn Cloughley** | | | **ID Number** | **A00360119** |
| **Mailing Address** | | |  | | |
|  | | | **1926 Anne Lane NE, Olympia, WA 98506** | | |
| **Telephone** | | **(360)763-6376** | |
| **E-mail** | |  | |

**Robyn.cloughley@gmail.com**

**STUDENT AGREEMENT:**

**SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**FACULTY READER APPROVAL:**

**SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**MES DIRECTOR APPROVAL:**

**SIGNATURE:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

1. **Provide the working title of your thesis[[1]](#endnote-1).**

We Talk About Climate Change

1. **In 250 words or less, summarize the key background information needed to understand your research problem and question.**

A woman to a visitor center on federal public land asked, “What is the difference between the climate change that occurred here thousands of years ago and the climate change everyone’s talking about right now?”. “Oh boy,” I thought, “here we go!” The visitor, however, accepted my answer to her question, but my coworker did not. He thought anthropogenic climate change a hoax and my answer unprofessional. Conversations about climate change, whether with park visitors or amongst staff, are never just about earth science. Humans have an ancient psychology that affects the ideas we accept and the way we operate within a group.

Many public lands showcase physical, compelling evidence of climate change, past and present. Some administrators instruct interpretive staff to talk about it, while others hope to avoid the subject. Resources on climate change communication are abundant. Yet to my knowledge, all instruction focuses on the individual. It suggests that an individual’s psychological and earth science knowledge solves the issue. But to encourage quality climate change conversations in public lands visitor centers, one must view what is happening to the staff through a group-level lens. Interpretive staff operate as a group or team, where they either feel safe to express misgivings, try new ideas, and settle conflicts or they do not. Understanding and improving interpersonal psychological safety within the team provides an opportunity for staff to engage willingly and creatively in climate change conversations amongst themselves and with the public.

1. **State your research question(s).**

RQ1: What does research on team interpersonal psychological safety offer public lands interpretive staff teams?

RQ2: What do public lands supervisors and instructors of climate change communication, improvisational theater, and social theater say about their experiences creating successful teams in their work?

RQ3: What are interpretive staff members’ experiences of psychologically safe and unsafe staff teams and of handling climate change conversations within those teams?

1. **Situate your research problem within the relevant literature. What is the theoretical and/or practical framework of your research problem?**

Social psychology identifies humans as the *most* social animal (Aronson & Aronson, 2018). Humans have five core motivations, the lynchpin being ‘belonging’ (Fiske, 2018). As a result, when our brain is not engaged in any particular purpose, our default is to think about people (Lieberman, 2013).

Current news is full of evidence of one of the strongest theories in social psychology (Aronson & Aronson, 2018; Haidt, 2013), Social Identity Theory, which explains how we build our individual identities based on the groups to which we belong. Within the large umbrella of social psychology, we can understand public lands visitor centers staffs in terms of how small groups work within an organization, Organizational Behavior (A. C. Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In this case, the organization is the visitor center and the group consists of the staff itself as well as visitors to the center who together constitute a variety of small groups. Studies in organizational behavior provide insight into the learning behavior (A. Edmondson, 2011), collective intelligence (Meslec et al., 2016; Woolley et al., 2010), and interpersonal psychological safety of small groups (A. Edmondson, 1999) that connect to aspects of positive psychology, such as Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2004) and Positive Organizational Psychology’s team resiliency (Losada, 1999; Luthans, 2002). Team psychological safety, or team interpersonal safety, refers to a “climate in which people are comfortable being (and expressing) themselves” (A. Edmondson, 2011, p. 1). At a visitor center, the staff need to feel safe and confident in order to effectively engage with the visitors. They need to develop a “willingness to contribute ideas and actions to a shared enterprise” (A. C. Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 24), to address questions of climate change and to engage with those who question the science behind it.

Applied Improvisational Theater principles and methods allow individuals to experience and practice the social competencies that create interpersonal psychological safety (Schinko-Fischli, 2018). This is fundamental to handling controversial, emotional situations creatively, willingly, and with resilience (Carmeli et al., 2009; A. Edmondson, 1999; Luthans, 2002; Schinko-Fischli, 2018), and to promoting learning behaviors within organizations, all attributes important for talking about the difficult subject of anthropogenic climate change.

1. **Explain the significance of this research problem. Why is this research important? What are the potential contributions of your work? How might your work advance scholarship?**

This study contributes to solving the practical problem of handling discussions around anthropogenic climate change at public lands visitor centers and fulfills the need for more data “from a variety of team and organizational settings” (A. Edmondson, 2011). I have found no research on team psychological safety at public lands visitor centers, and what effects team psychological safety might have on the willingness and ability of the staff to discuss anthropogenic climate change.

1. **Summarize your study design[[2]](#endnote-2). If applicable, identify the key variables in your study. What is their relationship to each other? For example, which variables are you considering as independent (explanatory) and dependent (response)?**

My study is an interview-based qualitative study with no distinct variables. My study design is developed from Braun and Clarke 2009, *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*, a six-phase guide, and O’Neal and Hastings 2019, *Teaching Genuine Dialogue: The Potential for Using Improv*. Based on Braune and Clarke, I am using an essentialist, or realist method, that is from a theoretical, or top-down approach. Basically, I am looking for clues in the first interviews that map onto the principles of creating interpersonal team psychological safety that I have learned in my research. This design follows O’Neal and Hastings 2019, in which they interviewed improvisational theater students looking for indications of whether improvisational theater techniques could be used to teach techniques of facilitating dialogue based on overlapping principles and methods.

Thus, the first interviews will be with people experienced in generating psychological interpersonal safety in teams.

John Morris, Earth-to-Sky, climate change communication workshop leader

Daniel Knutson-Bradac, improvisational & applied improv theater instructor

Rebecca Rogers, family theater, improv instructor

Ryan Means, site manager Hudson-Meng Education and Research Center

Example Possible Questions:

* What experiences have these experts had in terms of team building using their methods?
* What actions or developments do they see as important in how the group or team creates interpersonal safety?
* What do they see as important in how the group or team generate novel ideas?

From these first interviews and resources such as Creswell 2014 and Krueger 1998, I can revise my interview questions for park ranger interpretive staff. Staff interviews will include questions specifically about their experiences handling climate change conversations with coworkers and visitors, and how they perceive the dynamics of their staff team influences these experiences.

A notice for interviewees will be posted on the National Association of Interpreters’ Facebook page for the Northwest Region. I do not know yet if other regions will allow me to post it.

Creating a survey instrument is also a possibility instead of interviews with park ranger staff. The benefit of the survey is that I can use Survey Monkey, an online survey service, for which I already have experience and an account, and which keeps the respondents anonymous to me. I can probably increase the sample size through a survey. The negative aspect of the survey is that I cannot ask deeper questions or explain the aspects of teamwork for which I am looking. Many of us function in staff groups without thinking consciously of the dynamics in play around us, and we also tend to think in terms of the individual’s responsibility to explain why people do what they do, a dispositional attribution (Aronson & Aronson, 2018), rather than looking to the situation people are in, situational attribution. In an interview, I can probe for more situational attributes of the feelings, thoughts, and actions, more in keeping with my group-level psychological lens.

Third, I would like to use the research I have done on the social psychology of groups, organizational learning behavior, positive psychology, and the results from my interviews to develop my own plans to increase team interpersonal psychological safety in public lands visitor centers. I am aware that applied improvisational theater principles and practices have been used with positive results in other organizations and plan to build on that experience.

1. **Describe the data that will be the foundation of your thesis. Will you use existing data, or gather new data (or both)? Describe the process of acquiring or collecting data[[3]](#endnote-3).**

Interviews responses, and perhaps online survey responses, will provide the data. Interviews will have to be mostly conducted using an online or cellular platform such as Zoom, Skype, or Facetime, or by phone, rather than face-to-face, due to Covid-19 protocols. I will ask if I can record interviews for transcription and erasure later. If recording is not possible, I can take notes during. I will write impressions immediately at the end of the interview (Creswell, 2014).

How the closure of many visitor centers due to Covid-19 will affect survey response is unknown. Park ranger interpreters might have more time on their hands and therefore willing to participate, or they could be more removed from their duties and less interested in thinking about my questions.

I might need to offer an incentive to entice interviewees to the process.

1. **Summarize your methods of data analysis. If applicable, discuss specific techniques that you will use to understand the relationships between variables (e.g., interview coding, cost-benefit analysis, specific statistical analyses, spatial analysis) and the steps and tools (e.g., lab equipment, software) that you will take to complete your analyses.**

A theoretical, or deductive, approach to my data means my analysis is driven more by my interest in the group-level psychological aspects of interpretive staff handling climate change conversations in public lands visitor centers. This leads to a more detailed focus on pertinent aspects of the data instead of a more all-encompassing description of all the data. I will be coding the data for matches with the ideas from my research. However, the flexibility of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) allows for the results of my interviews to lead me into a more specific focus of a certain aspect or my coding could evolve as in a more inductive, or emergent process. I might have to revise a question and return to further interviews. With guidance from Braun and Clarke and the other resource literature mentioned previously, and from my thesis reader, I feel confident that I can adapt my analysis as needed while remaining consistent in my methods.

1. **Address the ethical issues[[4]](#endnote-4) raised by your thesis work. Include issues such as risks to anyone involved in the research, as well as specific people or groups that might benefit from or be harmed by your thesis work, perhaps depending on your results. List any specific reviews you must complete first (e.g., Human Subjects Review or Animal Use Protocol Form).**

Experts I interview could potentially be hired to conduct workshops for public lands visitor centers. Benefits to my coworker interviewees could be the respect offered and felt when asked about their opinions and feelings. Interviewees will benefit if this study can help public lands visitor centers improve the work environment for the employees. Interviews might reveal park ranger interpreters’ opinions and feelings that they do not want others to know about. They could divulge workplace grievances that they do not want shared with their coworkers and supervisors. Therefore, the information regarding interviewees must remain confidential with identifying coding secured from exposure. I will follow ethical guidelines, minimizing risks to interviewees by protecting their identities, ensuring all are fully informed of the purpose of the research and my procedures to protect their identities, clearly informing them that their participation is voluntary and that they can terminate the interview at any time. I will strive to promote equity in my research. I will need to complete the application for a Human Subjects Review after completing the CITI trainings.

1. **List specific research permits[[5]](#endnote-5) or permissions you need to obtain before you begin collecting data (e.g., landowner permissions, agency permits).**

I will produce a consent form for my interviewees and give them a copy of the signed form. I will need permission to post requests for interviewees or my survey instrument on National Association for Interpreters Facebook page, or any other platform that specifically reaches interpretive staff.

1. **Reflect on how your positionality as a researcher could affect your results and how you will account for this in the research process[[6]](#endnote-6).**

I am a white female, cis-gendered, tail-end baby-boomer generation, who grew up in as middle class, all three parents having achieved higher educational degrees. I have two siblings (I am the youngest). We were raised in Texas during the 1960’s and 1970’s.

I grew up in Unlimited Potential, an improvisational theater and creative process program where I took risks due to the security of team interpersonal psychological safety; gained confidence through the focus of accepting and building on all offers; and learned to celebrate the emergent magic unique to collaborative work.

I will be disappointed if park ranger interpreters are not interested in and do not feel they need any team building support to handle climate change conversations. That is a possible result of the interview and survey responses. I am pushing back against a U.S. culture of competition and individualism (Kohn, 1992). Whole team acknowledgement for collaborative work, where no one person owns the ideas or accomplishments, competes with individual recognition and glory in our society. I also have difficulty in setting aside my own ideas and ego when the team goes in a different direction, so I recognize this way of working is not easy, especially if you have not had practice in it such as can come from applied theatrical improv training.

1. **Provide at least a rough estimate of the costs associated with conducting your research.  Provide details about each budget item so that the breakdown of the final cost is clear.**

My Survey Monkey subscription is $5.41 per month. If I give eight months to finish my survey, collect, analyze my data, and let it sit for a bit in case I need it, the total will be $43.28.

If I decide to offer an incentive for my few personal interview contacts, for example, in the form of a coffee card, that could cost me around $60.00 ($10.00 per card).

I pay for internet at my house anyway, so it is no extra cost. I do not plan on driving anywhere.

The total, therefore, could be $103.28.

1. **Provide a detailed working outline of your thesis.**
2. **Background**
   1. How my experience talking about anthropogenic climate change at public lands visitor centers and negotiating the group dynamics of the different interpretive staff teams led me to wonder if focusing with a group-level lens on climate change communication could be helpful in developing original, creative, and resilient ways of talking about climate change at public lands visitor centers.
3. **Introduction**
   1. The difficulty of handling anthropogenic climate change interactions at public lands visitor centers
   2. Interpretive staff perspectives on climate change
   3. Climate change communication best practices aimed at individual staff
   4. Impact of group dynamics on individual staff members’ abilities to navigate climate change interactions amongst themselves and with visitors
   5. Information gleaned from organizational behavior, social psychology, and positive psychology can reveal behaviors and dynamics that inhibit learning and performance in groups
   6. Principles and practices from applied improvisational theater allow for experience in building social competencies that can foster original, creative, and resilient ways of talking about climate change at public lands visitor centers
4. **Literature Review**
   1. Theoretical Background
      1. Social Psychology
      2. Social Psychology of Groups
      3. Organizational Learning
         1. Team Psychological Safety
         2. Learning Behaviors
         3. Collective intelligence
      4. Positive Psychology
         1. Broaden-and-Build theory of Positive Psychology
         2. Positive Organizational Behavior
         3. Team Resilience
      5. Applied Improvisational Theater
         1. Competencies shared with team psychological safety
5. **Methods**
   1. Expert Group interviews
      1. John Morris, Earth-to-Sky
      2. Daniel Knutson-Bradac, Improv Instructor
      3. Rebecca Rogers, Improv Instructor, Olympia Family Theater
      4. David Diamond, Theater for Living
   2. Non-expert groups
      1. Personal Contacts Park Ranger Interpreters and Supervisors
         1. WRVC
         2. Hudson-Meng
   3. Survey Posted on NAI Regional Facebook Groups
      1. Organize and utilize questions developed from groups
      2. Create survey on Survey Monkey platform
      3. Obtain permissions, if needed, to post survey on Regional NAI Facebook pages
      4. Begin collecting data
6. **Results and Discussion**
7. **Conclusions and Steps for Action**
8. **Appendixes**
9. **Bibliography**
10. **Provide a specific work plan and a timeline for each of the major tasks in the work plan. Be as realistic as you can, even though you will probably need to alter this schedule as you complete the tasks. Remember that faculty readers take time to return your drafts and that the final polishing and formatting of your thesis for binding will take longer than you ever imagined.**
11. Fall Quarter September 28 – December 18, 2020
    1. Complete Prospectus
    2. Complete draft of literature review
    3. Complete poster
    4. First meetings with thesis reader
    5. Attend virtual National Association of Interpreters 2020 Conference and pre-conference workshop on climate change communication – Nov. 5&6, Nov. 10 – 13th (full conference recorded so can view through Dec. 31st)
    6. Complete CITI online training
    7. Complete Human Subjects Review application by end of December
    8. Meet with thesis reader
12. Winter Quarter January 4 – March 20, 2021
    1. Submit completed Human Subjects Review application by Friday of week two, January 15, 2021
    2. Make contacts with experts and non-expert group participants
    3. Receive approval from IRB by end of January
    4. Conduct interviews with experts end of January, beginning of February
    5. Refine questions for interpretive staff based on above interviews
    6. Launch survey for two weeks, posting by mid-February
    7. Gather and analyze data beginning early March
    8. Follow Braun and Clarke’s recommendations to write while conducting interviews and gathering data
    9. Meet with peer groups
    10. Meet with thesis reader
    11. Close interviews or surveys
13. Spring Quarter March 29 – June 11, 2021
    1. Continue to analyze data if necessary while continuing to write
    2. Enroll in Karate for Leaders, MPA program, if possible.
    3. Consider it likely will have to extend through summer especially if state park visitor center job restarts
14. **Who, beyond your MES faculty reader, will support your thesis? Indicate support both within and outside of Evergreen. Be specific about who they are and in what capacity they will support your thesis. If you are working with an outside agency or expert, be specific about their expectations for your data analysis or publication of results.**

Currently, I can count on support from MES faculty such as Shawn Hazboun in winter quarter for social science survey issues as well as my husband for technical, conceptual, financial, and emotional assistance. I look forward to contacting the “experts” for my first set of interviews, and it would be nice if any turned out to be supportive and interested in my work.

1. **List the 3-5 most important references you have used to identify the specific questions and context of your topic, help with issues of research design and analysis, and/or provide a basis for interpretation. For each annotated reference, explain how your project specifically connects to the source by extending, challenging, or responding to the conclusions, methods, or implications. For any other sources cited in this document provide a complete bibliographic citation.**

Aronson, E., & Aronson, J. (2018). *The Social Animal* (12th edition). Worth Publishers.

This book is the definitive textbook for Social Psychology. Not only did I spend all summer reading it and taking notes, I use it when I need to look up a psychology researcher, a framework theory, or the overview of the social psychology tenet under which my specific group dynamic falls. It is almost an encyclopedia for social psychology.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Carmeli, A., Brueller, D., & Dutton, J. E. (2009). Learning behaviours in the workplace: The role of high-quality interpersonal relationships and psychological safety. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, *26*(1), 81–98. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.932>

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *44*(2), 350–383. [https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999](about:blank)

Team psychological safety is turning into the cornerstone of my study. The term psychological safety used here describes a person’s comfort level with taking risks at their work. Put the word “team” in front of psychological safety and it turns into a group-level construct focused on the group as a unit instead of the individual. Team psychological safety describes a work group culture of safety to speak up, seek and give feedback, ask questions, call out errors, propose ideas, and work through disagreement without fear of humiliation or condemnation. “In this way, an action that might be unthinkable in one work group can be readily taken in another, due to different beliefs about probable interpersonal consequences.” P. 5 of 44.

Edmondson, A. (2011). Psychological Safety, Trust, and Learning in Organizations: A Group-level Lens. *Trust and Distrust in Organizations: Dilemmas and Approaches*.

Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *1*(1), 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305>

Fiske, S. T. (2018). *Social Beings: Core Motives in Social Psychology, 4th Edition*. Wiley.

Another foundational textbook for understanding social psychology, especially around small groups. The level of detail of the workings of group dynamics within small groups gave me a much richer, full, and nuanced understanding of what is achievable and what is difficult in building teams. Many empirical studies are embedded in this recent work that fleshed out the broad ideas I had coming from an improvisational theater background.

Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, *359*(1449), 1367–1378. [https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2004.1512](about:blank)

Haidt, J. (2013). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion* (First Vintage Books edition.). Vintage Books.

Kohn, A. (1992). *No contest: The case against competition* (Revised edition.). Houghton Mifflin.

Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Developing questions for focus groups*. SAGE.

Lieberman, M. D. (2013). *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect* (First paperback edition.). Broadway Books.

Losada, M. (1999). The complex dynamics of high performance teams. *Mathematical and Computer Modelling*, *30*(9–10), 179–192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0895-7177(99)00189-2>

Luthans, F. (2002). The need for and meaning of positive organizational behavior. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *23*(6), 695–706. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.165>

Meslec, N., Aggarwal, I., & Curseu, P. L. (2016). The Insensitive Ruins It All: Compositional and Compilational Influences of Social Sensitivity on Collective Intelligence in Groups. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *7*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00676>

O’Neal, K., & Hastings, S. O. (2019). Teaching Genuine Dialogue: The Potential for Using Improv. *Peace & Change*, *44*(4), 556–576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12374>

Schinko-Fischli, S. (2018). *Applied Improvisation for Coaches and Leaders: A Practical Guide for Creative Collaboration*. Routledge.

This book feels like “Home”. Susanne Schinko-Fischli studied psychology and improvisational theater. I think this combination is what makes her book so perfect for me. She is Austrian and this book has been translated into English from German by the American, John Newman. I have a few favorite improvisational theater and applied improv books, but this one is the perfect guidebook for the work I want do at public lands visitor centers. It strikes the balance of being about people and how they work, particularly in groups, and embodying the beautiful Zen-like principles of improvisational theater.

Woolley, A. W., Chabris, C. F., Pentland, A., Hashmi, N., & Malone, T. W. (2010). Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups. *Science*, *330*(6004), 686–688. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1193147>

1. You are not locked into this title; its purpose is to help you identify the main point or topic of your thesis at an early stage. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. You might discuss selection of case studies, sampling methods, experimental design, and/or specific hypotheses you will test. You should also address any specialized knowledge or skills that are necessary to complete the research. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. If you are planning to use existing data, explain the specific source, contact information, arrangement with collaborating agencies, and expectations about use of data and final products of your research. If you are planning to gather new data, describe specific methods, time, place, and equipment that will be required. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. If you’re not sure where to start, consult a ‘Code of Ethics’ or other similar document from an academic society in an applicable field of study. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. If you are collecting ANY samples or data, even observational data, on public lands (city, county, state and/or federal) it is your responsibility to find out the permit requirements BEFORE you collect data. Conducting research with tribal members/on tribal lands will have different and additional requirements. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Your *positionality as a researcher* refers to the fact that one’s “…beliefs, values systems, and moral stances are as fundamentally present and inseparable from the research process as [one]’s physical, virtual, or metaphorical presence when facilitating, participating and/or leading the research project…” (The Weingarten Blog 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)