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# In the Discomfort Zone: Emotional Labour and Reflexivity in Field Research on Extremism

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## ABSTRACT

As the literature on understanding and addressing extremism and terrorism has expanded, there has also emerged a significant methodological literature. As well as providing valuable insight about research design, this literature increasingly addresses practical issues, such as how to gain access to difficult-to-reach populations, how to build trust, and strategies for effective interviewing. There remain however a number of relatively neglected aspects of the research process. In relation to long-term qualitative research – a form of research increasingly recognised as essential to advancing our understanding of radical or extremist milieus – one of these concerns the more personal challenges that researchers encounter during and after their time in the field. In this article, we contribute to the emerging discussion on these personal challenges by sharing our own experiences of interviewing and conducting long-term fieldwork in a range of different radical or extremist milieus. Specifically, we go beyond observations about the well-discussed pitfall of “going native” and the proffering of coping strategies, to a more frank and difficult but, we believe, helpful conversation about how such research can reconfigure our professional and personal relationships and understandings of our own subjectivity, the emotional challenges and discomfort that this can entail and the insights that this can render.

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Fieldwork can be hard work and emotionally draining work. (...) However, though in the social sciences we have concerned ourselves with the effects of human subjects' research on the interviewees, we have seldom worried about the interviewers.<sup>1</sup>

There is widespread recognition today that detailed, long-term, interview-based or ethnographic research can make a valuable contribution towards understanding and addressing extremism and terrorism.<sup>2</sup> As such methods have become more widely used, there has begun to emerge a significant methodological literature concerned with

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the use of such methods within this field, including a growing number of handbooks or special issues of journals.<sup>3</sup>

This body of literature now provides extensive advice and insight about undertaking such research within this field – including about research design, and about various practical, ethical and methodological considerations, such as how to gain access to difficult-to-reach populations and effective interviewing strategies.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, some areas of this literature that remain underdeveloped. As Rasmussen argues in the above quote,<sup>5</sup> one such area is the personal impacts and emotional challenges of conducting extended fieldwork with radical or extremist milieus. This has begun to change a little, especially in recent years, as scholars have written more extensively and reflexively about their research experiences.<sup>6</sup> Yet even in these cases, issues about the personal impacts and emotional challenges of such fieldwork are usually discussed only as part of a wider methodological reflection, and often subsumed within discussion of the “reflexivity” required for fieldwork more broadly.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, they become subsumed within discussions about researcher safety, access to the field and how to avoid “going native” by focusing on the need to “stay professional,” “rational” and “detached” from one’s research subject.<sup>8</sup>

Fieldwork, however, is not just a “professional experience,” but a profoundly personal, human one, that involves “reaching out to other human beings,”<sup>9</sup> particularly when it comprises long-term interview-based or ethnographic research. In that sense it also involves a variety of emotions and human reactions that influences not only our relationships in and beyond the field, but also our understanding of the field and the knowledge we produce.<sup>10</sup> Over the years, our conversations with fellow researchers have convinced us of the need to talk more about these issues. This is partly about the need for greater transparency around research processes in this sort of fieldwork.<sup>11</sup> It is also about encouraging conversations that we believe can help researchers at any stage of their career better prepare for and deal with the personal impact of this type of research.

At the heart of our discussion is the acknowledgement of and a will to explore how we as researchers and people navigate a balancing act that is central to such research. We need to build rapport with our respondents, who often comprise some form of “repugnant cultural other,”<sup>12</sup> while simultaneously keeping sufficient professional distance to be confident in the robustness of our own research and safeguard our credibility among our academic peers and any policy communities with which we might wish to engage. This balancing act demands a lot from researchers. We argue that our human vulnerabilities that are laid bare to ourselves during fieldwork should not be hidden from outsiders behind the still-dominant tendency to give superficial and textbook mimicking reports of “neutralizing” one’s feelings and “staying professional.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, we believe that true reflexivity requires us to bring these challenges and their concomitant discomfort out into the open, and that it is by doing this that we can really enhance the validity, reliability and ethical integrity of our work.

After describing the process through which this contribution came about and the research that forms the basis of our experiences, the article proceeds in four sections. First, we reflect on some of the main challenges we faced while entering the field and trying to gain trust. Second, we discuss the often ambiguous nature of relationships with our research participants while in the field in terms of otherness and closeness.

In the third section, we discuss our relationships with third parties, both inside and outside academia. In the fourth section, we elaborate on the value of the discomfort discussed in the previous sections. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the principal contribution and implications of this discussion.

## Background and Methodologies

The idea for this article is born out of a growing realisation that there were issues that we had all encountered in our fieldwork experiences that were not well addressed in the literature. Some of us had already discussed the issue of emotional challenges and discomfort at a conference (Fiore & Lana) or during our relationship as PhD student and supervisor (Léa and Fiore). Joel became involved when we decided to write a contribution about these struggles for this special issue. The first step was to sit together and discuss aspects of our fieldwork where we had experienced forms of relational discomfort. We created a series of categories based on our fieldwork and post-fieldwork journeys and started to collate our personal experiences – in the form of auto-ethnographic reflections – and relevant literature in a shared document. As we collated this material, the sharing of experiences brought to mind other, faded experiences, and these were also captured. This resulted in an extensive list of experiences that we discussed together and re-organised into sections for development. During the writing process that followed we had frequent online meetings to clarify – if needed – the examples that others provided and to identify, explore and reflect on emerging patterns in our experiences.

We were interested to explore both similarities and variance in our research experiences, and the possible explanations for that variance. As we now discuss, our research experience encompasses both right-wing and Islamist milieus, in different countries, research in formal institutional settings and outside of such settings, and with varying degrees of liaison with public authorities. In terms of our own positionality, we were also mindful of the role of gender, age, religious and ethnic identifications and relative experience as a researcher in shaping our interactions both in and beyond the field. The variance between the authors has enabled such comparison (see [Table 1](#), below for a summary), although we note that there are areas where this conversation could be enriched further through engagement with a wider range of positionalities and geographies. For example, all of the authors identify as white, and the primary focus of all our work has been in northern Europe. Furthermore, we all write broadly within a field/disciplinary cluster around terrorism studies, criminology and the study of radical milieus, and we are mindful that some of the issues discussed here also have relevance for research practice in cognate fields such as peace and conflict studies.<sup>14</sup> What was striking, however, was that the similarities in our experience tended to outweigh the difference, as discussed below.

Fiore's research concerns Islamist milieus and participants with different backgrounds and orientations, including “moderate” and “orthodox Salafi” as well as those involved or formerly involved in radical or extremist Islamist movements. Her research conducted between 2006 and 2009 was for her PhD and includes both men and women, converts and “born-again” Muslims.<sup>15</sup> Latterly, between February 2017 and May 2018, she has carried out work focused specifically on converts.<sup>16</sup> Her work has primarily been

**Table 1.** Studied groups and used methodologies.

	Country	Start/duration fieldwork	Studied groups	Research setting	Research method(s)
Fiore	Netherlands and a couple of months UK	2006–2010 (PhD project) 2017–2018	Muslims (different orientations, including those involved in extremism), converts to Islam (different orientations, including those involved in extremism)	Public and private settings (e.g. mosques, youth centers, court) Online Dutch forums	Biographical/life-course interviews and informal conversations Online/offline observations
Joel	UK	2010–2012 (Post-doc)	Anti-Muslim protest movements	Public & private settings Online forums	Ethnographic fieldwork, biographical narrative interviews
Léa	Netherlands & Belgium	2017–2019 (PhD project)	Individuals (formerly) engaged in (pro-) jihadi movements	Public settings Online forums	Biographical/life-course interviews & Informal conversations Online/offline observations
Lana	Belgium	2021–2023 (PhD project)	Prisoners engaged in religious extremism & right-wing extremism	8 different (Flemish) prisons Public & private settings	Biographical/life-course interviews & Informal conversations Life diagrams Pictorial measures

conducted in the Netherlands, with the exception of a three-month fieldtrip to the UK, and involves a combination of 62 biographical/life-course interviews, hundreds of informal conversations, observations and online content. Her fieldwork and data collection took place in private and public settings, such as people's homes, cafes, Salafi mosques, youth centers, courts, and Islamic conferences and lectures, and on popular online forums.

Léa undertook her research in Belgium and the Netherlands, with individuals who had either been involved in pro-jihadi movements in those countries and/or had travelled to conflict areas to join jihadi groups. Like Fiore, Léa's research included men and women, converts and "born-again" Muslims—though the majority of her respondents were converts. She also used a combination of biographical/life-course interviews, informal conversations and offline and online observations. Online observations were conducted in Telegram chat groups, public Facebook groups and on Twitter. Offline observations and interviews took place in a variety of public settings, with some interviews also conducted at participants' houses or through electronic messenger apps, such as WhatsApp, Telegram or Threema. Léa conducted the majority of her fieldwork between 2017 and 2019, a period during which ISIS had already started to lose parts of its territories. In total she interviewed 12 key informants and had informal conversations with approximately 20 individuals who had ties with jihadi milieus in Belgium, the Netherlands or in Iraq and Syria.

Lana conducted research in Belgium and interviewed prisoners (both men and women) in 8 Flemish prisons who have been convicted of right-wing or religious terrorism/terrorism-related offenses or who have been convicted for other acts (e.g. drug-related offenses, murder) but who, according to state security, have/had ties to extremist groups. Lana also used a combination of biographical/life-course interviews and informal conversations, along with pictorial measures and life diagrams. She has interviewed respondents multiple times (three, as a minimum) over a two-year period between February 2021 and February 2023. In total, 62 interviews have been conducted.

Joel's research has been with a combination of racial nationalist and anti-Muslim movements in the UK. The main project on which this article draws entailed a 16-month period of post-doctoral ethnographic fieldwork with grassroots activists between 2010 and 2012, including offline and online observation and interviews with 18 activists using a biographic narrative approach.<sup>17</sup> His engagement with activists took place across a wide range of public and private settings, from street-based activism and Facebook groups to meetings in pubs, cafes and various function rooms, and from informal conversations while traveling to and from events with activists, to interviews in people's houses. He has subsequently continued to work on similar milieus, but without undertaking such extended fieldwork with activists.

### **Earning Your Way in: The Precarious Balance of Gaining and Sustaining Trust**

When entering the field, researchers who conduct in-depth interviews, participant observations or “thick” ethnographic studies are highly dependent on the cooperation and goodwill of respondents, and other members of their respondents' social environment, to allow us to enter their worlds.<sup>18</sup> Our initial encounters and the first impressions we make on those we study have an important – even decisive – impact on further trust and rapport building; the *sine qua non* to successful and reliable research.<sup>19</sup> This process of entering the field and gaining trust requires a continuous and precarious balancing exercise on the part of the researcher in terms of presenting and positioning themselves. This can be especially challenging when potential respondents, or their close contacts, see the researcher as belonging to a dominant and critical “outgroup.”<sup>20</sup> Given how high the stakes are, getting this “right” can become for researchers a source of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty about how to behave, whether and when to adapt, and what to disclose to “earn our way in.”<sup>21</sup>

This is something that we all struggled with as we entered the field. How, when feeling like an outsider in relation to our respondents, with our worldviews and life-style seeming, at least at first sight, radically at odds with theirs, should we gain our respondents' trust? While we knew from the literature that being sincere, respectful, polite, and transparent about the research and our role would be a first stepping-stone to gaining access,<sup>22</sup> we all formed the view that gaining and maintaining access to our respondents, earning their trust, building rapport, and getting accepted would require more of ourselves; including going beyond the facade of the researcher.

In recent years, a number of scholars have stressed the importance of different factors that help bridge differences and inspire a sense of “commonality” between researchers and participants who do not share important social characteristics such as political or ideological beliefs, religion, cultural backgrounds, or race.<sup>23</sup> These factors relate to subtle qualities and are reflected in a variety of skills and attitudes; “as well as doing (skills), being (personal qualities) is also important.”<sup>24</sup> For all four of us, striking a balance between staying true to ourselves and adapting to our participants was an integral, if sometimes challenging, part of this process. These adaptations involved direct and indirect adjustments and both (sub)cultural and behavioural adaptations<sup>25</sup> conditioned both by the group we were studying – Islamist or far right – and our own positionalities in terms of gender, religion, ethnicity, age et cetera. In Fiore

and Léa's research, for instance, some of the initial meetings took place in their respondents' environments or living worlds, such as mosques or during Islamic events. As such, to gain trust and out of respect to their respondents and others in those spaces, they ensured that they observed the cultural rules, values and norms that apply within these contexts. For example, both researchers did not wear revealing clothing or too much make-up during the interviews, refrained from shaking hands with male respondents unless they initiated this, and did not look them straight in the eye during their initial interactions if this felt inappropriate. In Lana's research, such adjustments involved shifts in attitudes and body language depending on and tailored to the prisoner sitting in front of her. When introducing herself to the prisoners, she found herself shifting her position: being humble and subservient among the older religious extremist prisoners, sisterly and amiable among the prisoners of the same age, and playing tough and fearless among male far-right prisoners with a more serious (violent) criminal record.

What is important to note, is that although these adaptations were part of our role "on-duty,"<sup>26</sup> we did not experience such adaptations as something instrumental or merely a means to an end. On the contrary, these roles felt like part of ourselves and, over time, these small and sometimes unobservable adjustments occurred unconsciously and automatically during interactions with respondents and even went beyond the actual research setting. Over the course of her fieldwork, for example, as Fiore sought to maintain her integrity as a researcher, she noticed small changes in her everyday lifestyle, such as going out less frequently to bars or clubs to drink or dance, especially on the evening prior to a morning visit to a mosque. For us, being reciprocal by adapting to our context and respondents, sharing mundane details or background information about ourselves, answering questions and showing interest helped to gain and maintain a sense of (mutual) respect, equality and ultimately rapport building. As these roles were still aligned with who we are or how we behave "backstage,"<sup>27</sup> over time it did not feel as though we were adapting or had to switch between roles, but rather that the focus shifted to a specific part of ourselves. This in turn made it easier to disclose or transpire more of this "self" once we felt we gained access to our respondents.

However, moving beyond the façade of the researcher brought us to the question of the extent to which we should adapt, and "how much" of ourselves we could disclose during our first encounters with respondents or potential respondents without this leading to social desirability bias, misuse, misinterpretations or respondents not wanting to speak with us any further. Furthermore, such adaptation was not always received as anticipated. In Léa's research, for example, one of her respondents felt offended after she asked him whether she should cover her hair during their meeting – a question also posed to the other respondents. Instead of interpreting this question as a form of respect, he perceived this as over-adaptive behaviour and a form of cultural othering. Of course, what is perceived as over-adaptation will vary from one participant to another, making it a difficult exercise for the researcher. Drawing from such experiences, we found that while adapting to our respondents was to some extent necessary in this type of research, it was also important to remain true to our off-duty selves, and to not feel constrained from revealing differences between ourselves and our respondents – a position similar to that adopted by Speckhard who, during her interviews in Iraqi prisons, chose to wear a burka and headscarf out of respect for



her respondents, but decided not to do so outside the prison as she still identified as a Christian.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, Fiore refrained from wearing a headscarf unless explicitly asked to do so; Léa chose not to cover her piercings and tattoos when she was meeting respondents for the first time and continued to smoke as she would do in any other situation; and, when asked, Joel did not hide from EDL activists that he did not believe in the “clash of civilisations” thesis that underpinned their activism. According to our experiences, this did not negatively affect our fieldwork. In Fiore’s case her recognizability as a non-Muslim turned out to be an invitation to talk to her for the Muslims that she encountered. For Léa, it created a sense of recognition or relatedness among some respondents, as they interpreted her tattoos and piercings as markers of “outsiderness” in mainstream fields. For Joel, it created opportunities for theoretical discussions.

Like other researchers who have carried out fieldwork within radical or extremist milieus,<sup>29</sup> we all also encountered at least some distrust among participants or their broader social networks, which sometimes led to rejection, insults, threats, or even intimidation. Joel, for example, encountered situations where respondents had been advised by people in their social circles not to talk with him. Similarly, before and during her introductory meetings with the prisoners, Lana encountered several rejections; prisoners who did not show up without indicating their reasons, or prisoners who even urged each other not to participate in the study (anymore). Such setbacks are often considered part of the job, and the reasons for such distrust may vary. It might be the product of a bad experience with other researchers or journalists; fear of misrepresentation; fear of information being leaked to security actors, even simply the legacy of many years of distrusting anybody in some way associated with what could be called the establishment. Nonetheless, encountering such distrust can have a significant impact on the researcher.<sup>30</sup> As we entered the field, convinced of our good intentions and integrity, such encounters with distrust often caused us to question our own self-presentation, almost perceiving ourselves as we imagined ourselves to be perceived by some of our respondents: as an outsider, an intruder, a spy. Consequently, we often found ourselves questioning why we were putting ourselves through these difficult situations and experiences. We felt uneasy and reluctant when approaching new respondents, and constantly felt as though we had to prove ourselves to earn our way in.

We also had experiences in which it seemed to us that our trustworthiness was being tested by our participants. In some cases, this was mundane: did we provide respondents with a transcript when we said we would? In other cases, it was more complex. For example, after becoming known to the EDL activist community, Joel was included in a number of private Facebook and text groups that his participants used to organise non-clandestine events. After several months of fieldwork, however, he was also included in a text group about plans for a counter-demonstration against a left-wing group for which activists had not got permission from the relevant authorities. When Joel received the first message, he checked with one of the organisers whether his inclusion was a mistake. Having been told it was not, he found himself wondering whether this comprised some form of test; there had been concerns among activists about informants, and he wondered whether he had come under suspicion and this was the way to test him. He never knew for certain, but the experience left him with a distinct sense of unease, fluctuating between on the one hand concerns



he might be under surveillance from the EDL, and on the other hand, concerns he had spent too long in the field and was becoming paranoid.

### **Managing Social and Emotional Otherness and Closeness in the Field**

Once in the field, interpersonal relations between researchers and participants remain a central aspect of the ethnographic endeavor. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the way we interact with respondents in the field and relate to them has a significant impact on the quality of the data gathered, the knowledge we produce and the way we understand a particular phenomenon. For instance, closeness is recognized as an important prerequisite for grasping the emic perspectives of research participants and hence interpreting data correctly.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, in the context of research with “distasteful others”—those individuals and groups with whom the researcher shares neither political orientation nor way of life and whose politics and/or way of life are found objectionable—<sup>32</sup> it is often assumed that interpersonal relations are difficult to build and sustain due to a lack of shared value between researchers and participants. This is especially the case in the context of research with the movements we studied. As Marcus notes, a common assumption when dealing with extremes is that one is dealing with the “cultlike, the exotic, and the enclosed... Extremists are supposed to be like exotic others, living with their own cosmologies and self-enclosed senses of the real”<sup>33</sup> and significantly different from “us.” In such a construction, interpersonal relations between researchers and respondents are often seen as highly artificial, instrumental and fraught with mutual otherness and hostility,<sup>34</sup> making intersubjectivity and mutual understanding difficult, if not impossible.

Over recent years, however, scholars using approaches that entail extensive qualitative research have started to acknowledge the complexity of researchers’ positionality, noting that “given the multiplex nature of identity, there will inevitably be certain facets of self that joins up with the people we study, other facets that emphasize our differences.”<sup>35</sup> Such a view resonates with our research experience, which suggests a more ambiguous researcher-participant relation, one where otherness often coexists with mutual connectedness. Even though we did not share our respondents’ exclusionary views and, as discussed below, our “otherness” in relation to our respondents was regularly confirmed, there were numerous occasions during our fieldwork in which the social, emotional and/or epistemological distances collapsed, generating a sense of closeness and mutual connectedness with our respondents. It is this ambiguity that we want to address here—a dimension rarely addressed in the methodological literature—and the challenges that it brought us. More specifically, we elaborate in this section on how otherness and closeness manifested throughout our research: the negative and positive emotions it at times generated towards our respondents, including the doubts, discomfort and questioning it raised over what constituted an appropriate mode of distance and closeness.

### ***Confronted with Our Position as the “Enemy Other” in the Eyes of Our Participants***

We all encountered expressions of animosity or aggression directed towards individuals or groups that we identified with, both face-to-face and during online encounters and

observations. Fiore, for example, recalls a follow-up interview with a respondent in which he vigorously remarked that for him “all unbelievers could be killed” and that he “did not care about them at all.” This made her realise that, despite the rapport that had been established and the respectful interaction, he was talking about her too. Similarly, she recalls an incident with a respondent that she had been in touch with for approximately ten years at the time and with whom she usually chatted about their day-to-day business. When IS emerged, one of their conversations concerned the enslavement of Yezidi women, which her respondent considered legitimate, thereby reconfirming the distinctiveness of their worldviews. Joel was repeatedly confronted with EDL activists’ views that universities comprised part of “the problem” because of their role in propagating “cultural Marxism,” even though most activists who knew him were quick to exonerate him of such accusations.

We also encountered expressions of our otherness that were directed more specifically at us. This included accusations from respondents that we were complicit in the issues that they were fighting against, or for most of us instances of being “tested” or threatened by respondents. A respondent told Léa, a French woman, that “her people” had “colonized” the Middle East. In Lana’s case, a male respondent who already had a criminal record for having committed a violent crime admitted that prior to the interview he had looked up private information about Lana online and during the interview sought to “test her” to see if she would be intimidated. He threatened her that if she would wrong him, he would go after her family and get back to her “twice as hard.” Towards the end of one demonstration Joel was informed that some activists from another part of the country had believed him to be a left-wing infiltrator and had discussed stabbing him, until one of the London EDL organisers vouched for him.

That we should have had such experiences is perhaps to be expected. In studies on extremism and terrorism, the working assumption has tended to be that respondents comprise part of a very distinct out-group from the researcher, will be difficult to engage with and potentially hostile.<sup>36</sup> As such, to some degree at least we had all anticipated such confrontations with our own otherness, and had thought about the various advice within literature – about avoiding “Stockholm syndrome,”<sup>37</sup> and whether to hide our personal views so as to avoid potentially dangerous confrontations<sup>38</sup> or to acknowledge our otherness in interaction with respondents in the field.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, these experiences still had an impact on us, particularly at an emotional level. Part of the reason for this was that while we all were rationally aware of our ideological otherness in relation to our respondents, such sudden confrontations in a context of general rapport and sometimes friendly contact caught us by surprise, and generated a complex set of emotions. When confronted with deep expressions of animosity, we experienced discomfort, shock, and disappointment in the respondents in question. When confronted with violent film footage, stories of death and threats, we felt sadness, drawn down or depressed, unsafe, paranoid, disgusted and even, sometimes, desensitized. Both Léa and Lana had nightmares about some of their respondents.

As has been discussed in the wider literature on the affective dimensions of fieldwork,<sup>40</sup> dealing with these complex emotional impacts was often challenging. When experiencing negative emotions in face-to-face contact with respondents, we felt compelled to manage our emotions – to “park” them so we would not express these emotions verbally and non-verbally. We avoided for example expressing disappointment

or disgust because we worried that doing so could harm rapport if the respondent felt judged and that giving in to such emotions would affect our capacity to show sincere interest in the worldviews and meaning-making of our respondents. Similarly, when respondents tested us, we sensed that we had to “pass” this test by not showing the emotions they were trying to arouse in us. In other contexts than in face-to-face contact, we had more options, such as reflecting on them in thoughts and in fieldnotes or, in the case of the more intense or long-lasting emotional impacts, speaking with family, friends, other fieldworkers, and colleagues and – in the case of PhD research – supervisors. Unfortunately, however, we did not always feel that colleagues were open to discuss these issues, either due to a “this is part of the job mentality” or, as we discuss further below, because of a certain sense of disapproval of the work that we were undertaking.

Another way of dealing with such experiences was to take a temporary distance from respondents and our research, by finding distraction in other activities, personal life, and hobbies to help to see our experiences in perspective again. In addition, we kept reminding ourselves of our ambition to understand our respondents and that this is not the same as justifying their behaviour. We also reminded ourselves that, as outsiders, we are seen as the “enemy” and that ambiguous and negative feelings towards respondents are hence to be expected during fieldwork.

### ***Unsympathetic Subjects? Encountering Closeness in the Field***

Even when one finds the worldviews of one’s respondents abhorrent, by talking to people, by getting to know them, one inevitably discovers crossing points where their experiences connect.<sup>41</sup> It was not rare, during interviews, to realise that aspects of our lives were not so dissimilar from those of our respondents. Some had similar hobbies or intellectual interests and in some cases, similar political roots. Bringing to the fore a variety of subject positions other than “far-right activist,” “Islamic extremist,” or “pro-jihadis,” these commonalities created a sense of relatedness that transcended ideological allegiance and facilitated dialogue and openness.<sup>42</sup>

The fact we did not share the same ideological framework as our respondents did not mean, moreover, that we could not empathize, be moved or touched by some of their experiences. Some of our respondents had experienced various forms of trauma—suffering, loss and abuse that challenged binary distinctions between perpetrators and victims<sup>43</sup> and that confronted us with their personal vulnerability. This generated in us feelings of compassion, empathy and even sympathy. Léa recalls a particular interview with a jihadi supporter who had been captured for his alleged involvement in a terrorist attack and claimed to have been tortured during his detention, and had a close relative that died in Syria. In such an encounter, which as Mahmood notes is not solely about ideology, culture and religion but first and foremost about human suffering, “many of the borders around ourselves that we construct as ethnographers simply fall apart; our own human reactions to what we are hearing break through all methodological artifice and impact in turn our interlocutors, who likewise cease being “informants” and share, however fleetingly, a moment of empathy beyond categorization or judgment”.<sup>44</sup> One does not solely feel the pain and anger of the other, but in fact feels pain for the other. As scholars concerned with social (in)justices and inequalities,

we moreover felt that we were not immune to some of the concerns that our respondents voiced towards the social and political world, whether that was injustices in geopolitics, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the inaction of Western government in the Syrian war prior to the rise of ISIS, concerns about the increasing securitization of Muslim subjectivities in Western countries (in the case of Léa, Lana and Fiore), or the politics of “austerity” and the impact it had had on low income communities (in Joel’s case). While our general normative standpoints differed from that of our respondents, we felt we could still relate to some of their grievances.

Furthermore, as researchers and participants in ethnographic research interact over an extended period of time and get to know each other, personal feelings are likely to emerge, such as affection, fondness or even a mutual sense of connectedness.<sup>45</sup> This is something that we all experienced. In Fiore’s case, some of these relationships extended beyond the initial period of fieldwork, with one such relationship spanning over 17 years and counting. To this day, they meet up once or twice a year. While their outlook on life is fundamentally different, there is a mutual connectedness that has grown based on their shared history, life events and everyday experiences. As long as political issues do not come up, Fiore explains, it is like being in touch with a “regular” friend: there are things they can laugh about, complain about, simply chit-chat about, et cetera.

Overall, extremist and terrorist actors have often been described as “distasteful” and “unsympathetic” subjects because of the premises on which their ideological framework rest.<sup>46</sup> Getting to know and talking with people involved in radical or extremist milieus, however, can allow researchers to go beyond their extremist “master status”<sup>47</sup> and encounter other aspects of them and their subject positions, some of which they may dislike, but others of which may resonate with them<sup>48</sup>. The feelings of affection, compassion, empathy and even sympathy that are generated can in turn help overcome differences between researchers and participants and create relationships of trust, mutual respect and empathic understanding. Such emotions are often essential for effective research, particularly where we are talking about long-term fieldwork.

Yet feeling and acknowledging this sense of connectedness with some research participants also brings challenges that are important to reflect upon. Some of the challenges we experienced were about how our relationships with research participants began to encroach into other spheres of our lives. Joel, for example, spoke of the awkwardness of receiving birthday greetings on his Facebook wall from activists with English flags and “NFSE” (No Fucking Surrender Ever) as their profile pictures or with names such as “Micky England,” and of his feeling of unease when thinking about what friends, relatives or colleagues would think about such expression of closeness.

In other cases, it was about how evolving relationships began to affect the mutual expectations of researcher and participants alike, sometimes making it difficult to maintain our role as researcher. Lana, who interviewed some of her respondents four or five times over a period of more than two years, was confronted on several occasions by some of them for not meeting them more often. Most of the time these confrontations took the form of disapproving comments such as “I thought you would no longer come,” but in one case her respondent became angry and accused her of not keeping her word, generating feelings of guilt and making her feel as if she was exploiting her respondents.

Moreover, there is a risk when relations between researchers and participants extend beyond the field and develop into a more intimate bond that their role as “friend,”

“confidant” or “sounding board” come to overshadow their research relationship. This was for instance the case for Fiore with her long-term contact. Léa also experienced difficulties keeping up her role as researcher and relating to one of her respondents as “research subject” as their interaction started to expand into a friendship. Concerns about being “unprofessional” and doing something “wrong” were accordingly quite frequent, generating feelings of doubt, insecurity, anxiety, guilt and shame and leading us to question our methodological approach, our professionalism and how we should manage our relations in the field.

Common as well across all our experiences were conflicting emotions about our feelings of sympathy with some of our respondents. Joel, for example, recalls feeling genuine concern and sympathy for an activist with whom he had built up rapport and who found himself on trial for actions that could, if he was found guilty, jeopardise his livelihood and seriously affect his family. This sympathy was in part rooted in a strong suspicion that the individual had not done what he was accused of – he was in fact later acquitted – but even so, Joel could not escape a feeling that his concern for this activist and his family, and subsequent relief when the case was dismissed, somehow crossed or blurred a line that could undermine his integrity as a researcher.<sup>49</sup> Was this a form of “going native”? While sympathy has often been regarded as an appropriate emotion in research with marginalized and dispossessed communities, it remains a somewhat “forbidden” emotion in extremism and terrorism research. As Ramalingam notes in her methodological reflections on conducting research with the far-right, “Sympathy in this case is deemed impossible because the premises of most far-right groups’ ideological frameworks and their tenets of cultural exclusion and assimilation inherently contradict anthropology’s endorsement – intellectual and moral – of cultural relativism”.<sup>50</sup> “Empathy not sympathy” is thus considered the appropriate formula when conducting research with actors whose views are “out of bond” with what is considered as morally acceptable.<sup>51</sup> It can be challenging, in this context, to realize that one feels sympathy, attachment or affection for people we believe we should not sympathize with. Should we not be supposed to dislike them?<sup>52</sup> And were we becoming morally complicit with their views by allowing ourselves to feel affection or appreciation for them as people?<sup>53</sup>

## **Our Relationships with Third Parties**

So far, we have focused on the relation between us as researchers and our respondents. Yet, the discussion of “complicity” with which we ended the previous section, hints at the relevance of viewpoints of third parties, including academic colleagues, activists in movements opposed to the groups that we were studying, and members of policy, practice and law enforcement communities. In this section we discuss some of these interactions with third parties. We pay particular attention to how our encounters with their expectations, understandings and anxieties about our work, and their alignment or otherwise with our own perspectives, affected our research journeys.

### ***Anxieties about Researcher and Participant Safety***

One of the first sites in which our expectations and experiences interacted with those of colleagues was through institutional ethics procedures. Since the 1990s, institutional

ethics procedures have transformed research practice, especially in the social sciences and humanities, where ethical review processes are a more recent innovation.<sup>54</sup> Two of the main concerns of such processes have been about the protection of research participants, and the safety and well-being of researchers. As such, it is the norm today for researchers engaged in long-term fieldwork to give a great deal of consideration to their own safety and well-being and that of their research participants. The fact that such concerns were an important part of our research experiences is therefore to be expected. What was noticeable from our experiences, however, was how often there were misalignments between our understanding of these issues and those of some of our academic peers.

In terms of concerns about our own safety, we were all aware that our research carried certain risks and, as made apparent in the sections above, these were occasionally brought into particular focus through our interactions in the field. By and large, however, such concerns did not dominate our research experience, and the threats that we encountered were not always those that colleagues and friends necessarily anticipated. As we had prepared for our research, colleagues, project reviewers and ethics panels had often focused on potential threats that our research participants and the wider milieus to which they belonged might pose to our safety. Indeed, one application Joel had made for a fieldwork grant was turned down on the grounds that ethnographic fieldwork with the EDL was simply too dangerous. Yet such threats rarely comprised the main focus of our anxieties. Joel's greatest concern about his own safety was about being caught in the middle of a confrontation between EDL activists, their opponents and/or law enforcement, or being misrecognised as an EDL activist and being attacked by EDL opponents as crowds dispersed at the end of a demonstration. Similarly for Léa, some members of her faculty were particularly focused on the potential risk that respondents may pose to her, and she was consequently asked to write a security protocol about how she would protect her own safety. Yet what she felt far more anxious about was the possibility of being monitored by intelligence services.

In terms of participant safety, the greatest source of anxiety for all of us, but particularly for Fiore, Lana and Léa, was about the data getting into the "wrong hands." Fiore, Lana and Léa all experienced considerable anxiety about state surveillance and the risk that state security actors might access their raw data in some way. These anxieties were only fuelled by their actual encounters with state security actors (see the section on "associative stigmatization," below), their participants' own anxieties about surveillance and their uncertainty about state security actors' monitoring capabilities. Other scholars working with similar populations have raised similar concerns, arguing that sometimes upholding principles of informed consent might actually create risks for and come into conflict with the principle of confidentiality if a researcher found themselves being compelled to share their records with state actors.<sup>55</sup>

Such anxieties took a toll on us. It was not only the concerns themselves, but also the way that such anxieties brought into question things such as whether or not we were actually able to keep promises we had made to participants about confidentiality, thereby raising difficult moral, as well as practical, dilemmas. To some extent, we all sought to minimise these risks. Fiore avoided recording interviews in her PhD project, and kept any identifying information in a notebook or secured in separate documents



stored in a different folder in order to reduce the likelihood that participants could be identified if her data were compromised. Joel pseudonymised his participants twice to make it more difficult for anybody other than him to trace any links between files that contained participants' personal details and their transcripts. Léa worked with participants themselves to identify material in the interview transcripts that could potentially compromise their anonymity. Yet the fact that the primary threat of surveillance was perceived to come from the state, meant that such strategies had only a limited effect in diminishing that anxiety.

What intensified these anxieties and their effects on us was the feeling that often there were few colleagues or friends with whom we could talk about this – feelings rooted in the way our anxieties seemed not to map easily onto what people around us perceived as the primary challenges of our research. In some ways it is easier and can feel safer to tell colleagues that you are anxious about interacting with members of a group who most people would identify as extremists. It can be harder, at least within an established democracy, to say that your primary concerns are about state surveillance, without sounding like a “crank.” Similarly, Joel worried that his colleagues and friends – many of whom are anti-racists – might think he had “gone native” if he admitted to them that he believed it was probably some of the anti-racists turning out to oppose the EDL who posed the greatest threat to his personal safety while in the field.

Again, what this points to is how this sort of research reconfigures your relationships not only with your research participants, but also with your wider communities of reference, including both academic and non-academic. As we forge researcher-participant relationships with people within radical or extremist milieus, it can feel as though our understanding of the world around us is slipping out of easy alignment with that of the people who normally comprise our primary reference groups. This can be highly disconcerting.

### ***Encountering Third Party Distrust and Associative Stigmatization***

Despite the widespread recognition of the value of collecting primary, in-depth data on extremist and terrorist groups, when it came to doing our fieldwork, we all encountered unease and/or distrust among third parties about our contact with our respondents and our normative stance.

In his article “Whose side are we on,” Howard Becker discusses the “charge” that researchers take the side of their respondents through sympathizing too much with their research subjects and consequently develop a research bias.<sup>56,57</sup> This charge of taking sides is visible in terrorism research through the previously discussed warnings of becoming “too sympathetic” to one’s research subjects and the risk of “going native.”<sup>58</sup> Extremism and terrorism researchers who have carried out such research have on occasion faced such accusations from politicians, policy makers, the media, fellow academics, and personal contacts.<sup>59</sup> For example, De Koning, a Dutch researcher on Islamist extremism, was labelled in popular and social media as “dr. Scimitar” and “Salafi licker.”

In our experiences such “stigma by association”<sup>60</sup> manifest in a number of ways. A first type of associative stigmatization concerned expressions of a lack of trust in our



professionalism due to our close interactions with extremists or terrorists. For example, prison managers interfered with Lana's contact with the respondent that had tested her (see above). They argued that the contact was ended for the sake of Lana's safety, but Lana believed the decision was informed by a view among the prison management that the respondent started to regard Lana as a friend instead of a researcher and was perhaps the product of a – maybe gender related – lack of trust in Lana's professionalism. As a result, Lana started to doubt the professionalism of her working methods. These feelings of doubt inspired her to reflect on her interview methods by taking a break from interviewing and talking about her struggles with more trusted respondents and other researchers. Lana discovered that prison counsellors had experienced similar associative stigmatization, with prison guards often referring to them as “the terrorists’ next best friends.” This period of reflection helped Lana to become convinced of her own research methodology and professionalism, and to set aside the views of the prison staff.

A second type of associative stigmatization was related to our perception that we had crossed the surveillance radar. This is something we expected in advance, because of the value of our data to intelligence services, and which we knew we had to reflect on from an ethical perspective, as discussed in the previous section. Something we did not expect, however, was the personal impact of such experiences which ranged from simply feeling suspect to developing a temporary sense of paranoia. This occurred most clearly in Léa's case, after a Dutch Intelligence Service officer contacted her, interrogated her and seemingly tried to recruit her as an informant. Whether or not monitoring was actually taking place, such incidents contributed to continuous awareness of the possibility that the intelligence service might be listening in to our conversations, monitoring our research activities, and maybe even trying to get access to our interview transcripts or field notes.

A third type of associative stigmatization concerned reactions among our academic colleagues. Such reactions seemed to spring from the fear of us getting too close to participants and “going native.” Such reactions were commonly expressed as either warnings or jokes: as jokes about us converting to Islam or coming to university one day covered in Islamic traditional garments, or warnings to avoid becoming radicalized ourselves or being too “sympathetic” to our respondents. When we talked about our fieldwork experiences and results, such as the emotional labour or nuances to existing stereotypical images of extremists or terrorists, others regularly expressed criticisms towards our stance or methodological approach. For example, every now and then Fiore shared some of her fieldwork experiences with a colleague, who repeatedly expressed his dislike of Islamist views and argued Fiore was maybe not sufficiently critical of her respondents’ viewpoints. Should Fiore not confront them with their own beliefs and point out the inconsistencies?

These experiences highlight several issues that extremism and terrorism researchers have to be prepared for. As a starting point, critical reflections on research methodologies and findings are part of the academic process and are hence welcome. Yet, we also received criticism for pointing out nuances regarding the humanity and viewpoints of our respondents, which in our view conflated our efforts to understand such activism with attempts to justify it. Moreover, such experiences point to a consequential sense of alienation that researchers in this field can face. Researchers are not only

“the other” in relation to their respondents but can also come to feel distanced from their professional colleagues within and outside of academia.

### **Negotiating Our Positionality: Situational Ethics and Discomfort as Reflexive Tool**

During our conversations about our research experiences, two points repeatedly came to the fore: the importance of situational ethics in managing our research encounters, and the reflexive value of discomfort. As such, it is to these two points that we briefly turn to in the final section of this article.

“Situational ethics” involve the ethical dilemmas that are bound to the empirical reality of the field under study and that tend to emerge during fieldwork.<sup>61</sup> As discussed in further detail below, once we began talking with one another about our fieldwork experiences, it became apparent that one of the characteristics that we all shared had been an ongoing wrestling with dilemmas, such as how to position ourselves in relation to our participants; about how, if at all, to engage with policy and practitioner audiences; and how to manage confrontational encounters with or between individuals in the field. Negotiating these dilemmas demands improvisation and ethical sensibility on the part of the researcher,<sup>62</sup> yet we encountered little consideration within our institutional ethics procedures about how we might prepare for such demands. As such, we all found ourselves developing our own ways of navigating these dilemmas somewhat “on the hoof” and from a general idea of “keeping it human.” Joel, for example, developed his principle of “non-dehumanization,”<sup>63</sup> in which he sought to treat EDL activists in the same way as activists in a movement whose aims he broadly endorsed, so long as this did not entail becoming complicit in what he considered the most fundamentally problematic aspect of their movement: their dehumanization of various Others.

Making the step from this non-dehumanization to our own humanity, our discussions led us to a clearer view of the value of feelings of discomfort both as a reflexive aid, and as means to deepen our insight about our research subjects. Feelings of discomfort are inherent to the ethnographic experience, for ethnographic research implies, by its very nature, to reach out, connect and engage with other human beings “across a sometimes immense cultural gulf”;<sup>64</sup> navigate the messiness, anguish, uncertainty, tensions and moral dilemmas that haunt the research process and expose ourselves to situations that take us out of our comfort zone and lay bare our vulnerability—as researchers and as human beings. This is perhaps even more true in the context of close-up research with extremist and terrorist actors, where researchers must navigate the tension between, on the one hand, being accepted by a community itself perceived as unacceptable to achieve a closer understanding of how they view the world and give meaning to their practices and, on the other hand, constantly monitor the boundaries of their own role and their interactions in the field so as to not become (considered) morally complicit with the movements they study.<sup>65</sup>

These feelings can be taxing. We suggest however that they can be an effective tool with which to negotiate one’s position vis-a-vis respondents and manage relations in the field. To feel discomfort, we suggest, is to feel that we are potentially crossing a boundary. In that sense, discomfort can alert us that we might be at risk of losing

our critical distance, our personal boundaries, and prompt us to pause and reflect – how close are we to crossing a line, where do “field spaces” and “personal spaces” meet, how do we balance “being there” for respondents and “going native”? Such boundaries are of course not fixed but are something that we constantly have to renegotiate as we move across situations and interactions. We also acknowledge that they will be different from one researcher to another and from context to context. The point we are making is just that those feelings of discomfort can provide vital opportunities for critical reflection. They also provide an opportunity to reflect on our internalized “feeling rules”<sup>66</sup> – those norms that dictate how we think we should emote in a given situation or relationship – and what those feeling rules reveal both about the normative structures that permeate our research practice and how these relate to the social, political, cultural, institutional and historical context in which we are embedded. Why, for example, is empathy broadly felt to be appropriate in the context of research with extremist and terrorist movements but not sympathy—sympathy being often associated with “moral contamination”. Hayward has argued there is an urgent need for scholars on extremism and terrorism not to normalize those who join extremist and terrorist movements, but to “humanize them.”<sup>67</sup> We argue that questioning the feeling rules that underpin how we think we should feel towards respondents with objectionable views, deconstructing the context that “allows us to deem them ‘unsympathetic’”<sup>68</sup> and allowing ourselves to feel positive human emotions in our interactions with them is a first step in our view towards a more human understanding of extremist and terrorist actors’ lives and identities.

Furthermore, and as Kathleen Blee argues, being attuned to the emotional dynamics of our interviews and our ethnographic observations can give us vital insight about how emotions work within and constitute the groups that we seek to understand.<sup>69</sup> For Joel, for example, the experience and associated discomfort of standing with EDL activists as they were confronted by anti-racists, some of whom threw assorted projectiles, gave him an opportunity to experience first-hand the fear, vulnerability and adrenaline that comprised essential components of the emotional cocktail that drove and sustained activism in the EDL.

In practice, using discomfort as a reflexive tool and critically examining feeling rules is a task to be continuously aware of. This is a task for not only the researcher, but also research collaborators and especially in case of early career researchers, their supervisors. A first step would be to create space within the research project for reflection, both in time and mentally, and both while being in the field and when leaving the field. At the stage of fieldwork, reflections can still significantly contribute to safeguarding the quality of the research project and if described in fieldnotes can form a source of data available for analysis.<sup>70</sup> Then it is possible to reflect on experiences of discomfort in fieldnotes and conversations by addressing a series of questions, individually, with co-workers and, if relevant, supervisors. One could reflect on when the discomfort arose, for what reasons and what this tells a researcher about their own positionality, the feeling rules involved, the group under study and the relation with the research participants. Based on the findings of these reflections, further possible questions concern the implications for the remainder of the research project. Does the researcher need to reconsider the relation with research participants or other parties? When considering the way forward, additional questions would relate to what

the researcher needs, as a human and professional, to deal constructively with these experiences and feeling rules, including the role that colleagues, supervisors and other people in the researcher's personal and/or professional environment could play. When adaptations are being considered, relevant questions concern how these adaptations could affect the quality of the project as well as the wellbeing of the researcher.

## Conclusion

In this article we have contributed to the reflexive turn in extremism and terrorism studies by offering some insight into the personal impact of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews on us as extremism and terrorism researchers. We have discussed the personal and emotional impact of gaining and sustaining trust, negotiating complex and dynamic insider and outsider positionalities both in the field itself and with third parties, and the challenges of managing the situational ethics of such research.

Based on the experiences we have described and discussed above, our central argument is about challenging, or at least problematizing, existing notions of appropriate closeness and otherness in the researcher-respondent relationship when doing work within extremist milieus. Reflecting on our own experiences, we are sceptical about the value of trying to draw clear distinctions between the “professional” researcher who is empathetic but not sympathetic, and the researcher who, by crossing from empathy to sympathy somehow goes “native” or suffers from “Stockholm syndrome.” This, we argue, is because part of being in the field involves going beyond the black and white distinctions between good and bad actors. When you carry out extensive ethnographic or interview-based fieldwork, you do get to know your respondents not solely by their extremist or terrorist “master status.” You become acquainted with other aspects of their lives and their personalities, some of which can resonate with you as a researcher and as a person, can invoke sympathy and even be likeable, and can sometimes facilitate sustained contact over many years. This is not to argue that we should leave aside our critical positions when engaging with such actors; it is rather to argue that it is better to acknowledge and reflect on these emotions than it is to turn them into a sort of taboo.

What this raises of course is the need to better prepare researchers at all career stages for the complex emotions that such fieldwork generates. Part of this is likely to be about how researchers can learn and be empowered to see the ambiguity of these emotions – the discomforting sympathy, the simultaneous feelings of closeness and distance – as part of the fieldwork process and as an opportunity to gain insight into the lives and experiences of their research subjects and to reflect on their own shifting positionality. What time and space can be created in fieldwork to reflect on the personal impact that this kind of research has? How do you support or seek support when you have to deal with the personal impact of this kind of research? Are you empowered as a researcher – or do you empower researchers as a supervisor – to have conversations about these matters? And how, if at all, can institutional ethics processes better prepare researchers for negotiating the sort of situational ethics that we have described, without adding significantly to the often already overwhelming bureaucratic burdens?

The sort of fieldwork that we have described entails humans reaching out to other humans. It is an illusion that this can only be done “rationally” and that emotions, positive or negative, should or even can be neutralised. Instead, we should openly acknowledge and discuss our positionality and the personal impact of conducting fieldwork in extremism and terrorism studies. The ambiguity, discomfort and doubt that this kind of research brings forward is in our view thus not something to hide, but to openly embrace. This is what we argue true reflexivity requires us to do if we want to safeguard the quality of research in extremism and terrorism research.

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