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Methodology for the disliked: a call for situated ethics in close-up research with anti-gender groups

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Abstract

The close-up study of far-right groups often involves an intense emotional burden for researchers working with participants they dislike or even feel threatened by. This article proposes to think of the 'disliked' as a category of participants whom the researcher finds ideologically or morally objectionable due to their exclusionary attitudes. It calls for an approach of situated ethics to account for the particularities and complexities of disliked groups that can remain uncharted if studied from a distance. Furthermore, the article addresses the need to understand ethics and safety as entangled when researching disliked groups, since researchers must cautiously examine and handle the overlap between them. To explore this topic, the article draws on in-depth field-work with anti-gender groups in Spain and engages with the experience of empathising with people whose discourse and beliefs challenge the researcher's own well-being.

After attending a book presentation on the dangers of 'gender ideology' and feminism, I approached one of the organisers to introduce myself as a researcher interested in learning more about the group's activism. I was invited to join their regular anti-abortion actions at a local clinic. On the scheduled day, I walked down a quiet street and soon noticed a group gathering, some positioned at the clinic's entrance and others across the street. I was welcomed by the campaign leader, who introduced me to the volunteers and outlined their strategies at the clinic. While the group was curious about my stance on the issue, I politely declined to share my opinion, explaining that I preferred to stay

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impartial during fieldwork. My role as a researcher was accepted, and Maria,[1] one of the campaigners, expressed her appreciation for my conversational and listening skills, noting that she had enjoyed speaking with me. However, another volunteer, a practising gynaecologist, pressed me for a more detailed account of my research. As I outlined my interest in antifeminism, she clarified that the group did not consider itself antifeminist. I refined my explanation, expressing an interest in opposition to widely accepted or hegemonic feminist ideas. After she talked me through the group's strategy to persuade women seeking abortions to continue their pregnancies, our conversation concluded with her request to please share future publications, as these were highly necessary. She then immediately clarified her statement, 'well, let's wait to see what conclusions you reach' and recommended a book on 'silenced women', perhaps as a subtle guide to encourage my alignment with their perspective.

This is a vignette of a field that at times was very open and welcoming. In speaking to anti-abortion activists, I felt thankful for their willingness to be interviewed and I often empathised with them at the human level. However, I simultaneously had to contend with my own feelings of aversion to many of the arguments they presented. This juxtaposition underscores the intricate nature of navigating a field of complex and entangled issues, encompassing ethical considerations towards participants and towards oneself as a researcher, as well as matters of safety. In the words of de Coning (2023: 219), it is 'the unresolvable tension of acknowledging their humanity while abhorring their politics or actions'.

In this methodological article, I explore what it means to be 'one of those who go to the other side', as a fellow colleague recently described me. I present a methodological approach to studying groups I have named the 'disliked': a category of research participants whom the researcher finds ideologically or morally objectionable due to their exclusionary attitudes contrary to the well-being of a diverse citizenry and wider social cohesion. Put differently, it is the turn to what Ortner (2016: 49) described as a 'dark anthropology' interested in 'the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them'. It is the study of what has elsewhere been conceptualised as 'unlovable' (Fielding, 1981), 'unsavoury' (de Coning, 2023) or 'uncomfortable' (Faust and Pfeifer, 2021) research and groups.

The term 'disliked' underscores the often complex and uncomfortable emotional terrain traversed in sociological research, where it can indeed be possible to connect with participants at the human level despite an aversion towards their politics. This engagement aims to facilitate understanding, empathy and a more nuanced representation of participants' perspectives and experiences. I developed the term 'disliked' from my own fieldwork experience studying Spanish anti-gender groups, but it may well serve the purpose of researchers studying other far-right causes. I use 'far right' as the broadest possible umbrella concept that includes both political parties and other organisations or movements which commonly meet in their defence of xenophobic or nativist forms of nationalism and authoritarian politics, and often antigender sentiments. I define anti-gender as 'a loosely connected network of actors that seeks political goals through their opposition to women's and LGBTQ+ rights and lives' (Obst, 2024: 1).

The reason I advocate for research with the 'disliked' is to capture experiences such as those from the aforementioned anti-abortion activists, revealing an anti-gender field that is far

messier than often depicted in research conducted from a distance (Obst and Ablett, 2024). Many participants held conflicting ideas within their own activism. By engaging closely with anti-gender actors, I sought to gain deeper insights into their experiences and claims. This approach undoubtedly involves trade-offs, is not suitable for everyone, and there are many arguments against it, which I will also address.

I build on previous work advocating for more in-depth research with disliked groups and present two overarching arguments relating to the ethics and safety of such research. First, I call for situated ethics to account for the particularities and complexities of disliked groups, which can remain uncharted if studied from a distance. Second, I emphasize the need to understand ethics and safety as entangled when researching disliked groups, as researchers must cautiously examine and handle the overlap between them. Furthermore, this article serves as an account of fieldwork with disliked anti-gender groups, offering insights and guidance for others embarking on similarly challenging research journeys.

I commence by outlining my narrative approach, which has illuminated the intricacies of anti-gender movements and captured their dynamic nature. I discuss the specific case of Spain, where I have come to regard the anti-gender landscape as a convergence of sites and people. This is followed by an outline of my situated ethics approach, as I discuss some of the difficult (and troublesome) decisions taken during fieldwork. Towards the end, I examine the entanglement of ethics and safety through the complex dynamics existing between them.

Narratives from and about the field

Most stories of anti-gender actors begin with a 'tipping point' that generated the narratives they shared at the time of meeting. Usually, accounts are triggered by particular events: the experience as a teacher asked to promote sexual and gender diversity in the classroom, the experience of a parent whose children are 'subjected' to progressive sex education, the experience of fights over child custody perceived to privilege women, or the experience of perceived discrimination against men during job hunting. Nevertheless, these must not be understood as irreversible, unidirectional events, but as contingencies in lived experiences that shape individual and collective narratives. As the social media influencer Celia exemplifies, one can come to recognise 'gender' as a social construction, yet reject women's right to equal pay, or, as Consuelo and María show, one can defend the 'dignity' of the lesbian and gay population whilst insisting on the gendered binary and the 'complementarity' between men and women. More importantly, anti-gender sentiments emerge from a variety of political positionalities, with most participants sympathising with (far-)right ideas before becoming interested in anti-gender matters, whilst others are attracted to the far-right with gender as a hook that draws them in. A few even reject the far right entirely and consider themselves to be situated elsewhere on the political spectrum.

These vast differences highlight the need to recognise the locatedness of anti-gender mobilisation and to pursue an angle of situated knowledge. Exploring such knowledge through narratives allows the lived experiences of both participants and myself to emerge naturally, presenting them as storylines with an anti-gender plot.

The field

I draw on ethnographic data collected in Spain between September 2019 and May 2020. I spent this time in Madrid and a few other regions doing participant observation at all sorts of events related to anti-gender issues, from anti-abortion mobilising at clinics to film screenings, demonstrations, rallies, seminars or conferences. I had informal conversations with dozens of anti-gender sympathisers and activists, I carried out in-depth recorded semi-structured interviews with eleven participants and I conducted online observation on social media, mostly YouTube and X (formerly Twitter).

Participants included concerned participants or low-key activists—such as students, event organisers and civil servants – but also more publicly known participants, such as elected officials and social media influencers. There was a good balance between women and men, and vast differences in terms of religiosity, ranging from a strictly religious layperson working for the Catholic Church to people rejecting religion in its entirety. Politically, participants were leaning towards the right and mostly far right, yet some defined themselves as left-wing or progressive, a position they however struggled with, given their support for a cause traditionally considered conservative. Age-wise, participants varied considerably, ranging from the youngest being in their early 20s to the oldest in their 60s. Most people were from the city or region of Madrid, yet a few participants came from other places in the country. The socioeconomic status of participants was mostly middle-class. All participants were white and no one reported having a migrant background. All interviewees had some form of interest in anti-gender causes and had reflected or engaged in activism on these matters.

To study social media, I employed non-participant/unobtrusive observation drawing from netnography (Kozinets, 2019). This approach involved passively monitoring user interactions and content without direct engagement. It encompassed manual monitoring of social media to track interactions across platforms and content analysis to examine posts and materials uploaded by users. The focus was on X and YouTube. X hosts intense debates and is frequently used by anti-gender actors to promote their views and gain followers. YouTube, known for its lax content regulation, has allowed prominent members of the 'Spanish manosphere' to amass large follower bases of millions by promoting their views.

Whilst vast amounts of online data can tempt researchers to use automated mining tools, I agree with Kozinets et al. (2014: 267) that they fail to illustrate the 'actual, real-time, engaged, confusing, all-too-human participation in the social media community; its conversations; its people; and its temporal unfolding', which is precisely what I sought to capture. I hence conducted an observation of interactions publicly available on these two social media networks. On X, I read through hundreds of interactions and tweets, saving screenshots of some of those posts and taking extensive field notes. This helped me gain a sense of debates and mobilising efforts among anti-gender actors and provided insights into the nuances of online activism. On YouTube, I identified seventeen key profiles and followed their development over the period of my fieldwork. As I watched the videos that were being uploaded, I either took notes or fully transcribed and analysed them.

Importantly, I only gathered data on X and YouTube from profiles that required no registration to be accessed. This decision eased some of the ethical concerns of dealing

with online data. I regarded accounts set to private as a clear indication that users did not necessarily want their data to be used for purposes not directly intended by them. Furthermore, I recognised that even in the case of publicly available data, the perceived anonymity of a given user can lead them to reveal information they would have kept for themselves in a real-life situation (Eynon et al., 2017).

Narrative analysis

At the onset of my fieldwork, I had hoped to encounter a field of unified far-right subjects with clear antifeminist or anti-gender aims. Whilst analyses often picture 'human research subjects which seem to be stable, orderly, rational, consistent characters in a coherent and compelling narrative' (Nilan, 2002: 382), this was far removed from the variety of life stories I encountered in the field, each situated in their own social paradigm. As Shroufi (2024) observes regarding far-right groups, anti-gender actors also create multiple 'others', shift their allegiances over time and can have significant if not opposing ideas internally. In anti-gender mobilising, more than ever, 'the nature of the "subject" of research' is in need of being 'redrawn as contingent, multiple and unstable; constituted within historically, geographically and socially specific social relations' (Browne and Nash, 2016: 4) in order to account for the discrepancy within and across lived and narrated experiences. This is to say that a full analysis of anti-gender phenomena must inevitably go through localised experiences that situate actors within the places where they emerge whilst recognising transnational links and power dynamics.

'A central tenet of narrative scholarship is that all stories are partial, performative and in process' (Nichols, 2021: 48). Narratives are shaped by a set of social conditions, and most importantly, by complex power relations (Esin, 2011) which circulate amongst and beyond the anti-gender landscape. To understand anti-gender actors, I suggest we investigate the correlation between individual stories and public narratives. Participants use personalised stories to give meaning to their lives (Ntinda, 2019), and these are entangled with and derived from public narratives on anti-gender, which became visible early on in my fieldwork through the repetition of common storylines or plots turning around nationalism, conservatism and religion. After all, 'stories are drawn from a limited repertoire of available narrative resources' (Esin, 2011: 94).

The result of such entanglement of experience and public narrative can be defined as an individual's positionality, providing insight into 'how various elements are put together in response to the available cultural resources and interpersonal interactions' (Esin, 2011: 96). However, 'stories not only tell listener(s) about individuals but also about society and culture in which they are constituted and performed' (Esin, 2011: 109), meaning that my own interaction with participants constitutes an insight into the context in which their narratives occur. In this way, the construction of the narratives in the field is co-constituted by the relationship between the teller (participant) and hearer (myself) (Esin et al., 2014), underlining the researchers' influence on the field.

Through an analysis inspired by narratives, the analytical focus is placed on stories from the field and from the researcher's own involvement therein. Ntinda (2019) identifies three key elements that shape narrative analysis: temporality, sociality and place. *Temporality* is the attention to past, present and future, as narratives have the tendency to move through time. Often subsumed in nostalgia—or rather retrotopia (Bauman,

2017)—anti-gender actors have a particular investment in temporality, as they draw on a narrative of decay to picture a steady decline of 'family values' and 'tradition' (Obst, 2024). The case of Spain shows an anti-gender movement with a tendency to glorify Franco's dictatorship and Spanish colonialism. This is combined with a gaze into the future that sees society endangered through excessive ('beyond' equality) feminism and LGBT(Q+) rights, and ultimately with (heterosexual) men's rights at stake. *Sociality* 'entails paying attention to both personal and social conditions' (Ntinda, 2019: 415), the personal feelings entrenched in the 'conditions under which people's experiences and events are taking place' (2019: 415). This is the wider context of Spain's anti-gender movement as it intensified through opposition to same-sex marriage and, more recently, to key women's rights, such as access to safe abortion and protection from gender-based violence. However, sociality also refers to the relationship between the researcher and the field. Finally, the focus on *place* localises narratives, emphasising the fact that stories and knowledge are situated. Whilst it is important to consider an international dimension to antigenderism, this must always be analysed in dialogue with localised sites. With anti-gender movements, however, the difficulty lies in establishing what the field actually is.

Methods for a convergence of sites and people

I departed for Madrid with a preliminary fieldwork design of ethnographic inspiration, aiming to explore anti-gender movements. However, this was a difficult task in and of itself. On the one hand, I resonated with Lubarda's (2024) sentiments of ethnographic incompleteness, approaching a multi-sited ethnography with a cautious reluctance to fully immerse myself, driven by concerns for personal safety. On the other hand, I soon realised that, despite the existence of a loosely connected network of actors, it is nearly impossible to locate an anti-gender movement that allows us to perform the more traditional form of participant observation in a single site. The ambiguous and undefined nature of the 'anti-gender' field further complicated my ability to identify a concrete site or group for observation. I, therefore, came to understand the field 'as an almost random assemblage of sites that come into coherence through the processes of fieldwork itself: the field as deterritorialized and reterritorialized, as it were, by the questions brought to bear on it in the course of research' (Reddy, 2009: 90). This implied movement between locations physically separated from each other, but also between 'ideological positionings or frames of reference' (Reddy, 2009: 90); that is, a range of positionalities emerging in different contexts. I was prepared for an exploratory approach which I sought to carry out on the ground and in depth, including participant observation, interviews and social media analysis.

My initial approach involved directly contacting individuals I was interested in speaking to. My scope was broad, as I was prepared to engage with anyone supportive of one or more anti-gender causes, though I primarily focused on those situated on the Political Right. I achieved a relatively high response rate, with most people agreeing to meet me. However, on a few occasions, participants politely declined. My second approach entailed directly asking people I met at events for an informal interview, either on the day or by contacting them via email afterwards. Lastly, I employed snowball sampling, which proved particularly useful in accessing participants that are more

difficult to reach, such as a far-right MP and an employee of an ultraconservative Catholic campaigning organisation.

Whilst my fieldwork primarily consisted of participant observation and interviews, social media also played a crucial role. It served both as a means to identify in-person events and potential participants, and as a place to which I could extend my observation. In fact, social media proved to be the most effective platform to study antigenderism as a movement, especially during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Activism transitioned almost entirely online during Spain's strict and prolonged lockdowns, which made outdoor activities practically impossible. The lockdown in itself emerged as a valuable opportunity to continue studying antigenderism, as actors increasingly linked the pandemic with 'gender ideology'. This was particularly evident with the far-right party Vox and its leader Santiago Abascal, who significantly increased their online presence (Ramos Antón, 2021). Other anti-gender actors, such as YouTubers, also amplified their posting frequency to promote anti-gender narratives and capitalise on the online momentum. Whether the research site was online or offline, my fieldwork underscored the need for situated ethics to navigate the complexity of rapport building with the disliked.

Situated ethics and empathy for/with the disliked

I do not have an answer for the burning question of why, in a country like Spain, where temperatures can exceed 40 °C, there are settings in which men wearing shorts are frowned upon. This topic was a key argument for Lorena, a young woman who joined an interview I had scheduled with another participant. Lorena used office dress codes to illustrate gendered unequal treatments that disadvantage men and support the idea that society has gone 'too far' with women's rights: 'During summer, it was August, you can't imagine how hot it was, even in the office. Men aren't allowed to wear shorts, but women are (Lorena). Whilst I cannot align with Lorena's sentiment of feminism's 'overkill' manifesting in men's prohibition to wear shorts during summer, the conversation reminded me of my very own experience at the first antifeminist conference I attended. Wearing long trousers and closed shoes, I arrived perspiring, with a few flights of stairs still to climb. Like others, I used conference flyers as a fan to dry the sweat from my forehead. I was also carrying a bottle of water to keep hydrated and I had been given a folder with propaganda of the organising group. I soon realised that the reason I had no bag to place all these items in was yet another matter of clothing: I owned no appropriate bag for the setting. After the conference, I wandered through the shops of Madrid in shorts and sandals, hoping to find a 'manly' enough briefcase I could use to avoid turning up at events with a backpack. I was unsuccessful and decided to buy a laptop bag, believing it to be a universally acceptable item that looks smart enough for professional (and conservative) settings, as it is meant to hold your essential office supply. I opted for a stylish, yet inexpensive laptop bag that would last just long enough to see me through my fieldwork.

The importance of this reflection lies in my preoccupation with how to present myself in the field. It is often suggested that a researcher should mirror the style of participants in an act of respect and to facilitate the building of rapport. In light of this, my interest in the narratives and positionalities of participants also became a question of who I was and the

role I played in the field. My own narrative was that of a somewhat foreign researcher with long-term residence in the UK. I drew on the prestige of a foreign university system and its rigid fieldwork protocols of information sheets and signed informed consent forms to impregnate my presence with an air of science and academic authority (Pereira, 2017). I have found written consent and information sheets useful in the rapport-building process as described by Kawulich (2005), making participants feel secure and assured of an accurate and anonymous treatment of the information they would provide. Indeed, my affiliation with a foreign academic institution significantly facilitated my access to the field. This stands in contrast to the experiences of other researchers, such as Fielding (1981) and Lubarda (2024), who faced suspicion and obstacles from far-right groups precisely because of their academic connections.

I successfully established rapport whilst presenting myself as 'outside local categorical distinctions and boundaries' (Lee, 1993: 23) that counterpose dichotomies, such as feminism and antifeminism. Participants accepted that I would not share my personal opinion on matters in the interest of avoiding the contamination of the field. For the purpose of this fieldwork, in which I largely disagreed with participants' opinions, I followed Siegl (2019: 92) in seeing my role 'as one of an empathic listener, putting aside my own viewpoints and feelings, in order to see and feel from the perspective of my interlocutors'. The objectivity and neutrality that was read into my presence seemed to be further validated by being a man. I was likely presumed to be straight, detached from the emotional implication that queerness could have in matters of opposition to queer issues. As a man, I was likewise presumed to be in no danger of harbouring 'radical' feminist views. I somewhat mirrored participants in formality, yet did not go as far as them: my shirts did not feature the Spanish flag, my shoes did not shine, my trousers had excessive colour and I appeared 'weird', so to say. Johnston describes a similar experience, narrating how her body became an 'instrument' or 'tool' she used whilst refraining from sharing certain personal stories:

> I made a conscious decision to remain silent about my family background, my age and how my sexuality had shifted and changed over the years and in different places. This silence may have meant that others assumed that I was like them. Indeed, I took several steps to be more 'like' my participants. I dressed casually, 'younger', and wore clothing that might have been considered to be more 'butch' than 'femme' […] During the research process I used my embodiment to normalise aspects of gender and sexuality (I did not want to feel 'out of place', nor did I want my participants to feel 'out of place' in their own homes), yet my research aims were designed to question and challenge embodied hegemonic norms about places and people. (Johnston, 2010: 294)

Whilst my research is vastly different to that of Johnston, I experienced a similar need to fit in and not feel 'out of place' or make anyone feel that way. This need was driven in part by my hopes of building an empathic fieldwork experience but was also mediated by the safety concerns I will discuss below. Furthermore, mirroring participants was an act which helped me feel less alien and a coping mechanism for the challenges to come. Here it must be noted that the scarcity of close-up research on far-right groups (Toscano, 2019) is often linked to social researchers' disapproval of these groups, their finding of discomfort in studying them (Pilkington, 2019) and their worries about safety. It is worth noting that the personal characteristics of the researcher (gender,

sexual orientation, ethnic background, age…) can significantly increase the distress and difficulty of such research, or even make it impossible.

Reasons not to do close-up research with the far right include avoiding giving their messages a voice and preventing potentially unethical relationships with participants (Pilkington, 2019). I have myself struggled with these questions. As Blee (2017: 95) notes with regard to the study of white supremacy, it can give 'an inflated sense of the importance and viability' of such a project, meaning that I could myself be contributing to the promotion of anti-gender sentiments as a robust project worth pursuing. Examples are widely found in Spanish media, which could be considered partially responsible for the success of the far-right Vox due to overreporting after the party's 2018 electoral success in Andalusia (Munárriz, 2020). That being said, the understandable and foreseeable consequence is that most research continues to be externalist, carried out from a safe distance, through the analysis of publicly available data. Blee (2007a: 121–122) suggests that '[f]ew scholars want to invest the considerable time or to establish the rapport necessary for close-up studies of those they regard as inexplicable and repugnant, in addition to dangerous and difficult'.

On the other hand, internalist 'studies of far-right movements can provide a better understanding of the workings of far-right groups and the beliefs and motivations of their activists and supporters' (Blee, 2007a: 121) that are difficult to analyse from a distance. As noted by Lubarda (2019), close-up research with far-right or extremist groups does not always meet the expectations one has after looking at these groups from a distance, suggesting that close-up methods provide rich and valuable insights. I hence align with Pilkington (2019: 37) in arguing that close-up research with the far right actually has the very important outcome of overcoming a 'fixed, politically explicit standpoint' and in the acceptance that 'researchers' speaking position may shift over the course of the research'. This certainly raises questions regarding the potential for researchers to be subsumed into far-right imaginaries and to relativise their ideas or actions. In light of this, the information sheet presented to participants sought to provide good oversight of the purpose of the research in lay terms, as one of an explorative nature seeking to understand 'antifeminism' – a term I preferred over anti-gender, as participants could clearly relate this to an existing debate. That said, my change in positionality towards the fieldwork and the overall research project also represents the danger of what Blee (2017) describes as 'becoming numb', meaning here that as I heard the same storylines repeated often at interviews and events, the effect they had upon me decreased. As Blee (2017: 35) noted in her own research, this was the moment 'to end fieldwork and regain emotional separation from the research'.

When asked today about my fieldwork, I usually reply that one can get used to anything and that it was not that bad after all, with participants being rather friendly and welcoming. However, looking back at my field notes shows how the first few months, in particular, were very difficult. My first interview was already a significant challenge, for even as the participant spoke of hoax gender-based violence I could not help linking their words in my head with the news at the time: an entire family that had just been killed by a man in Spain the same week and the four children (under 10) whose mother had been killed by her partner a couple of days earlier. Furthermore, discussions on topics related to queerness were those that had a particular impact, as they related most explicitly to my own experience and existence, even turning my mirrored clothing and

scientific attitude into a coping mechanism. I inevitably pursued a form of affective scholarship or radical empiricism, 'an inquiry into the pragmatics of how to practice an emotional reflexivity that does not begin at the period of writing up or post-fieldwork supervision (hence "after the fact") but starts at the very onset of fieldwork itself' (Davies and Stodulka, 2019: 3). The following is a fieldwork extract I wrote immediately after an interview:

> I was really curious during the interview and asked directly: what do you think about 'homosexuals' (the word he had used)? Hearing his answer felt violent and personal, yet I tried to remain with the neutral/interested face I had been putting on throughout. He explained how he was against sodomy, but he was also being very empathetic and nice. It was confusing as one almost wants 'them' to be hateful. How could he say such horrendous, hateful words but seem such a nice person? (Fieldnotes, September 2019, my translation from Spanglish)

These convoluted feelings of contradiction, the liking and disliking, the empathising, the sadness and the anger, were something that would accompany me throughout the fieldwork, as I reconciled myself to the idea that 'one may end up liking people whose politics one abhors' (Lee, 1994: 24). It is therefore worth reiterating that fieldwork can produce positive feelings, yet it 'is also rife with affective and emotional dilemmas, when feelings of despair, disappointment and frustration arise between researcher and research participants' (Funk and Thajib, 2019: 137). The biggest challenge of my analysis has in fact been how to portray what I encountered in the field, and my own position and emotional development have played a key role in this, as throughout my writing I keep returning to my experience of being in the field. A significant concern in this portrayal is that contrary to what I and many researchers are used to, particular ethical challenges accompany the fact that I investigated actors I disliked and whose primary narratives I mostly disapprove of. Here, beyond physical appearance, a particularly important decision revolved around how to gesticulate and use facial and verbal expressions in relation to such narratives one disagrees with. Blee, for example, clearly states that she was not going to show what could be perceived as agreement when speaking to racist participants.

> [I]n an interview, I'm not going to nod when I am listening to someone spew a bunch of racist garbage. I'm not going to say, 'Oh yeah.' Instead, I just sat there like a deer in the headlights, saying 'Ok, well, onto the next question.' (Blee, 2007b: 18)

This, as Blee recognises, makes the building of rapport harder, as in other instances of research she would have shown that she was actively listening and even share personal stories connected to participants' narratives. Whilst I had similar concerns about showing complicity with topics I clearly disagreed with, I opted for a communication strategy that would not disrupt standard conversational codes. I follow Waldner and Dobratz (2019: 51) in arguing that a form of 'respectful listening' is indeed possible through the use of signs designed to keep a conversation going, as '[e]ven persons with what we believe to be abhorrent views deserve to be treated respectfully, if only for the fact that they have agreed to give up their time and share their views'. That said, the border between politely facilitating a conversation and appearing to stand in agreement is a constant negotiation. On one occasion, halfway through the interview, a

participant stated that I must have thought his views were crazy, which gave me confidence that, despite being able to have a laugh about banal anecdotes, smiling, or nodding, I was not conveying the impression that I stood in agreement with anything he said. This was also the case in the aforementioned field experience when a participant questioned if she would like the conclusions that I would reach. These examples show that it is possible to empathise, relax and perhaps even enjoy an interview, without worrying that one might be deceptive by giving participants the space to speak without challenging them.

This approach aligns with sociologist Nigel Fielding's (1981) seminal work on the fascist National Front in the UK. Fielding observed that individuals with far-right beliefs are as human as the researchers studying them and emphasized that doing the very important task of understanding the depth of these beliefs does not prevent researchers from forcefully rejecting them. The practice of what de Coning (2023) calls 'critical empathy' is thus possible, enabling researchers to recognise the humanity of participants while remaining critical of their political stances.

Events share similarities with interviews in that I often showed some form of support to avoid appearing out of tune or as a dangerous outsider. I found myself clapping to misogynistic and homophobic comments, or smiling at troubling jokes. Whilst my reactions were subdued – I clapped lightly and smiled rather than laughed – I was deeply unsettled by my own sense of temporal belonging and acceptance within a group I fundamentally disliked. Much of the literature on 'dangerous fieldwork' engages with forms of racist activism and it is usually white researchers who see themselves in need to clarify that they do not agree with participants' causes. This was the case for Blee (2017), whose participants hoped or expected that 'deep down' she would agree with them. Similarly, while I experienced perceived complicity as a cis white man presumed to align with an anti-feminist agenda, I was also confronted with expressions of hate towards queer individuals. For instance, someone spoke about the detrimental health implications of 'homosexuality'. As my fieldwork progressed, I did get used to clapping at such speeches, yet I struggled to conceal my profound sadness and anger, emotions I found increasingly difficult to mask.

My concerns regarding the potential for misleading participants by allowing them to believe that I supported their ideas arose alongside participants' own anxieties about my positionality as a researcher. On a few occasions, questions about migration were perceived as attempts on my part to divert the conversation. While the connections between gender and migration seemed quite evident to me, I wondered what caused participants to hesitate in discussing these links during our encounters. The topic of gang rape – a prominent issue in Spanish politics following the infamous case of La Manada (wolf pack), which led to widespread feminist demonstrations criticising the inadequate legal protection of women in cases of rape – surfaced a few times. When I asked the social media influencer Ismael to share his thoughts on the impact of migration on Spain, he quickly noted how different cultures entering the country would change society – presumably for the worse. However, he then abruptly stopped to remind me that this was not the subject we were supposed to be discussing: 'I think this one is a very different topic'. I insisted that there might be a relation between migration and gender, to which Ismael responded: 'Explain to me, in what sense?'. Before I could reply, he made a connection himself and asked: 'Do you mean the cases of rape that

immigrants commit?'. When I prompted him to elaborate on this, he provided a lengthy explanation about how gang rape cases are disproportionately a matter of immigrants, followed by a common far-right trope: 'I don't mind if they come as long as they respect our culture'. Yet, what puzzled me was why, despite holding a clear opinion that linked gender and migration, he hesitated to express it. In Ismael, I sensed an experience of dealing with people who attempt to derail his arguments. He was cautious with his words, as he reported having suffered much abuse online and felt that his ideas were often taken out of context or reports about him were simply lies.

The feeling of being deliberately derailed from the topic also emerged during my conversation with the 'pro-life' advocate María when we discussed her involvement in activism. I asked about gender-based violence and although she initially began to answer the question, she quickly halted, 'but well, that's a different topic to the one we are here to discuss today, right? We're here to talk about life or the unborn child or abortion' (María). Both Ismael and María appeared to have much to say about the topics in question yet they were reluctant to discuss issues they felt were unrelated to our conversation. They shared an unwillingness to address the subject of migration, which led me to wonder why they were prepared to speak on anti-gender matters but avoided engaging with migration. It appeared as if participants were more suspicious about the fact that I could misrepresent their views on certain topics, such as migration, or that they were not as convinced about their political stances on the matter, in what has been described as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Furthermore, Ismael and María's hesitance to engage with topics they felt to be unrelated, also suggested a desire to control the narrative, much as I sought to do.

This desire for control was particularly evident with a professor at a private Catholic university who was organising an event I was keen to attend. After expressing my interest, the professor responded with a lengthy explanation as to why the event was not relevant to my research, effectively blocking my access to it. These experiences revealed that my initial ethical concern about providing a fair outline of my research intentions was, in fact, a more complex matter involving negotiations over the arguments I might present in published work. Whilst I attempted to blend in and present myself as an emotionally detached researcher who would not question their narratives, participants assessed the situation from their own perspectives and made decisions about what they were willing to share with me. The result, I argue, is a troubling relationship between ethics and safety, underscoring the need to understand ethics as situated.

The troubling relationship between ethics and safety

As indicated previously, I agree with Pilkington's (2019: 33) argument that 'it is within our capacity as social scientists to build the quality of relations necessary for successful research on far-right activism without becoming an unconscious mouthpiece for the group or deceiving research subjects that we share their views'. However, the approach I adopted when researching actors I disliked was markedly different from the openness I have shown in the past when researching groups I could identify with and whose struggles I wished to support. This divergence in approach stems not only from the discomfort of sharing my views with participants whose opinions I dislike but also from the additional concern for safety, which is inextricably linked to ethics. In working with disliked

groups, it is crucial to 'be aware of what respondents can discover about you and to decide in advance how to handle questions or confrontations in a way that builds rather than erodes trust' (Waldner and Dobratz, 2019: 52). This is particularly important because, although as a researcher I adhere to a strict ethical framework, the potential dangers I may face remain unpredictable. Indeed, in the early stages of my fieldwork design, I received safety advice from a colleague who had worked with far-right online communities and received death threats as a consequence. Threats, as noted by Dumont (2023), may not be uncommon and must be handled as part of certain types of ethnographic fieldwork. Likewise, in conversations with both established and early career researchers in Spain, I learned of the harassment that has led some to abandon their research on anti-gender topics, further stressing the need to take pre-emptive safety measures.

Encouraged by the literature and conversations around safety I had prior to my arrival in Spain, I took several precautions to protect myself. These included gaining certain control over the publicly available information about me to mitigate the risk of doxing – the practice of publishing personal information about an individual, which is common among far-right online communities (Wendling, 2018). I requested search engines to remove traces of pictures and social media profiles, and adjusted my privacy settings. Following the advice of a colleague, I used a different fieldwork phone number and set up a separate email address, which I linked to my publicly accessible biography on the department website. Whilst I preferred participants to choose their preferred meeting locations, I ensured that these were public spaces during busy hours of the day. Prior to both events and interviews, I familiarised myself with the area. Inspired by the idea of leaving someone a sealed envelope with information about a participant and 'instructions to open it and contact the authorities if the interviewer did not call at a stated time' (Sharp and Kremer, 2006: 325), I adapted this approach to current technology. For field trips, I used a secure instant messaging service with my partner, to whom I would send a file with all the information I had at my disposal about a given event or participant in an expiring message. This ensured that the details were accessible in the case of an emergency while keeping confidential information secure if not needed. Additionally, I would activate live tracking in that same chat conversation and inform my partner of my expected return time. While involving family members is far from ideal, it highlights the urgent need for more robust support systems within research institutions.

The need to take such preventive measures, informed by the challenging experiences of other researchers, highlights the emotional burden that this type of fieldwork entails, with the emotional labour involved needing to be more openly acknowledged (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2023). In her reflections on long-term research on white supremacy, Blee (2017: 13) recognises that '[s]tudying the racist right has been intellectually and politically rewarding but personally too difficult'. Furthermore, Blee observes that she has never spoken to a researcher studying racist movements without the issue of emotional burnout coming up, calling for the need to make the emotional implications of this work more visible:

> [R]esearchers, especially those using qualitative methods, need to consider and discuss with colleagues, students, and friends the anger, resentment, fatigue, indignation, annoyance, aggravation, outrage, and irritation that are evoked by entanglement with their subjects, whether alive or

long dead, whether anonymous or known personally. We are more honest as scholars when we acknowledge the myriad ways in which our personal lives and emotions are intertwined with who, what, and how we study. (Blee, 2017: 19)

After all, the emotional burden that this type of research poses is a matter of well-being – and by extension, safety – which is often overlooked in universities' ethical guidelines and risk assessments. After my fieldwork was completed, I spoke to a colleague working on a project with funding for a monthly counselling session and realised how beneficial this support would have been for coping with the emotional challenges of research. It would have also helped me avoid unnecessarily burdening my partner and friends with fieldwork stories that sometimes left them questioning why I was doing this work. Universities should provide counselling to protect the ethical responsibility researchers have towards themselves (Pearce, 2020) because, time and again, researchers rely on 'like-minded colleagues at home and friends and family, who we often turn to for reassurance and to mitigate feelings of apprehension' (Browne, 2013: 432). Yet, beyond the private realm, there is a need to openly discuss the emotional implications of researching groups one dislikes and to address the complexities of establishing rapport, which often involves cultivating empathy while simultaneously experiencing deep outrage, sadness or fear in response to the worldviews encountered. As noted by Pearce (2020: 14), 'topics such as self-care and emotional labour should be discussed in supervisory contexts', given the 'ethical limits to the personal risks undertaken for the sake of research'. This applies not only to the relationship between doctoral researchers and their supervisors but also to the relationship between established researchers and their mentors, as well as among colleagues in collaborative research projects.

Whilst the literature on topics related to working with disliked groups or groups the researcher disapproves of is useful in establishing some general guidelines on ethics and safety, I argue that one's own positionality and research context require adapting these guidelines to make them work. I have hence come to value the situatedness of ethics in that they need to attend to particularities of research contexts in the same way that emotions must be seen 'as negotiated and relational […] rather than as an individual reaction or affectional state' (Blee, 2017: 34). A focus on situated ethics 'unfreezes ethics and highlights its fluid and transitory character, as well as its intersection with myriad other forces of power and meaning making' (Danaher and Danaher, 2008: 61). Situated ethics can make sense of the fact that '[r]esearch stances of empathy and rapport may be appropriate methodological stances for qualitative research with some respondents, but pose risks of exploitation, scholarly complicity in horrific political agendas, or dramatic misinterpretation if used with other groups of respondents' (Blee, 2017: 35).

Whilst reflections on ethics prior to fieldwork are fundamental, it is equally important to recognise that ethics must remain flexible and subject to constant revision (Simons and Usher, 2000) in light of 'the uniqueness and complexity of each situation' (Piper and Simons, 2005: 58). For example, Blee (2017) describes moments in which the imminent sense of danger compelled her to fabricate an excuse and leave a situation – something she could only fully assess at the moment. Although I did not interview people whom I perceived to be involved in physically violent acts, I still found it necessary to take preventive measures. On a few occasions, for instance, I was invited to join a group for a

meal, but my vegetarian diet would have posed significant challenges since catering was unlikely to accommodate it and Spanish cuisine is likely to carry some form of meat in all dishes. This would have led to awkward situations, as Spaniards tend to associate vegetarianism with progressive views. On the two occasions that this occurred, I politely declined the invitation by making up an excuse. Perhaps these were situations I could have managed, particularly since Spaniards often find certain aspects of British culture (my host society) awkward. In this context, a vegetarian diet might have been perceived as just another foreign quirk, rather than a marker of progressive values. However, a riskier terrain would have been to disrupt participants' presumption about my heterosexuality. With events and participants often narrating the dangers of the 'LGBT' or 'gay lobby', 'homosexuality' and 'transsexuality' being abhorred and labelled deviant — one potential participant was even involved in the performance of conversion therapies —I had pre-emptively decided in my research outline that I would lie about personal matters if necessary to ensure my safety. In this context, I argue that ethics and safety are closely intertwined, often in tension with one another; adhering strictly to institutional ethical standards could therefore jeopardise a researcher's well-being, highlighting the need for ethics to be situated.

Conclusions

As observed by Fielding (1981), sociologists with a humanistic approach tend to find comfort in studying groups they have sympathy for, and I, too, have enjoyed studying groups whose causes I supported or to which I even belonged. In contrast, in looking at anti-gender actors, I have spoken to people and attended events that essentially sought the restriction if not eradication of the rights and existence of people like myself or my friends and family. Such situations initially place the researcher in a defensive position. However, the reality encountered in the field can be more complex – one of fluidity and positionalities that do not always align neatly with the often oversimplified theories produced on anti-gender movements. Thus, the hardest decisions taken in completing research like this involve writing about those people the researcher dislikes, a compendium of dilemmas whose resolution ultimately relies on the researcher:

> Often the liberatory potential of research has been unproblematically assumed to be a linear move from silence to voice. […] [W]e trouble that assumption and explore what becomes the unsayable and the unspeakable as it relates to the research process. The complexity of human interaction often leads to difficult dilemmas for the researcher, who is ultimately the person responsible for writing up the research and making choices about who to represent and how, what to omit and what to include. (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010: 2)

Pasieka (2019) rightfully asks what happens when those 'unlikable' others become liked as our encounters with them reveal their humanity. She contends that critiquing their beliefs as unlikable is preferable to labelling them as unlikable people. While this argument has merit, it is crucial to acknowledge that our perception of individuals often does not clearly separate people from their beliefs. Instead, we form complex relationships that

encompass our affective and bodily responses, as well as our positionalities, making it indeed possible to simultaneously like and dislike participants.

The decisions as to how to represent participants, which have ultimately been taken by myself, are the outcome of much reflection throughout my fieldwork and particularly in its wake. As suggested by Toscano and di Nunzio (2019), it is precisely in working with the far-right – or disliked groups in general – that the researcher needs the ability to emotionally detach from the field in order to report results. Whilst I do not think that such a task is practically possible, I agree that some distance from the field – in my case meaning not only the termination of in-person fieldwork but strictly disengaging from social media – has been crucial to making sense of my encounters.

Reflecting on my fieldwork from a comforting distance in both time and space, it becomes evident that studying those we dislike requires a degree of closeness to truly understand them. A researcher's disapproving stance provides an excellent foundation to critically interrogate a group's lived experiences and claims. That said, the researcher may run into the danger of obfuscating their own analytical thinking driven by the all too understandable rejection of how these individuals and groups present themselves. Hence, studying the disliked involves coming to terms with one's own emotional reactions towards participants. In practical terms, this means practising a form of critical empathy that 'allows us to recognize the humanity of research participants we deem problematic, dangerous or ideologically antagonistic, while also retaining the distance necessary to critique the complexities of these subjects and communities' (de Coning, 2023: 229). Furthermore, in researching disliked groups we must consider the entanglement of ethics and safety as their separation would be rather artificial and nearly impossible.

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1.   All names have been changed to protect participants' identity.

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