“She Is a Woman, She Is an Unbeliever—You Should not Meet with Her”: An Ethnographic Account of Accessing Salafi-Jihadist Environments as Non-Muslim Female Researchers

Kathrine Elmoose Jørgensen¹, Henriette Frees Esholdt²

¹University of Copenhagen, ²Lund University

Published on: May 21, 2021

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

ABSTRACT

The Salafi-jihadist environment, which seeks to remain closed and clandestine, is extremely hard to access. Moreover, the milieu is gender segregated and hostile towards non-Muslims, even other Muslims who are not considered “real” Muslims. Depending on the researcher’s positionality this can either further complicate or facilitate accessing the milieu. Based on methodological experiences from ethnographic fieldwork (interviews and observations) in Denmark and Sweden, this article aims to unravel how researcher positionality influences different layers of access when investigating Salafi-jihadist environments. Acknowledging that gaining access is a continuous process throughout the entire research process, we specifically explore how our positions as non-Muslim female researchers both thwarted and assisted in: 1) the initial stage of searching for and contacting potential informants; 2) gaining further access through building trusted interpersonal relations; and 3) accessing sensitive emotional insights in the interview situation. The article argues that gaining and maintaining access as non-Muslim female researchers requires that the researcher be ready to play along with stereotypical gender views, undergo “trust tests,” and manage one’s own positionality by undertaking ‘emotional labor’ in accordance with stereotypical perceptions of women as, for example, providing comfort.

Introduction

Scholars (e.g. Dolnik, 2013; Horgan, 2008; Silke & Veldhuis, 2017) have for decades pointed to the problem that little research in Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies is based on fieldwork (interviews and observations) involving individuals with firsthand experience of engaging in Salafi-jihadism themselves, i.e. the violent defense of Islam (Wiktorowicz, 2005; 2006). In fact, only a minimal percentage of terrorism studies in general are based on primary data in the form of interviews with individuals having firsthand experience of engaging in terrorism (Lum et al., 2006; Sageman, 2014; Silke, 2001). Indeed, gaining access to Salafi-jihadist environments actively working to remain clandestine has been described as a daunting challenge for the researcher (Hemmingsen, 2011; Horgan, 2012; Necef, 2021; Nilsson, 2018; Speckhard, 2009). In the absence of firsthand sources, some have succeeded in generating primary data from secondhand sources such as relatives or other persons in the social milieu around people who have joined Salafi-jihadist environments by taking a “milieu-based” approach (e.g. Aasgaard, 2017; Larsen, 2020; Pearson &

Winterbotham, 2017; van San, 2018). However, scholars have recently also pointed to methodological challenges of generating this type of data (Aasgaard, 2017; Larsen, 2020; van San, 2018).

It is well known that Salafi-jihadist environments are characterized by gender segregation and a patriarchal gender order (Khelghat-Doost, 2019; Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017). In addition, they are hostile towards non-Muslims, and even towards other Muslims who are not considered “real” Muslims (cf. the *takfir* phenomenon—the declaration of Muslims as unbelievers) (Wiktorowicz, 2006). Researcher positionality is defined by a range of factors such as the researcher’s beliefs, political stance, gender, race, class, and socioeconomic and educational background, which may affect the research process (Berger, 2015). Thus, it does not take much imagination to realize that the researcher’s gendered and religious position may provide possibilities as well as obstacles in the process of gaining access to the Salafi-jihadist milieu. The interest in reflecting on the researcher’s positionality came under scrutiny in the social sciences as early as the 1980s (see e.g. Adler & Adler, 1987; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). It was kick-started with the so-called crisis of representation (see e.g. Clifford & Marcus, 1986; van Maanen, 1988), which was rooted in a critique of the perception of the researcher as someone able to observe social reality from an objective and unbiased point of view and without influencing the social life under study. Despite these insights, previous empirically based studies in the field of Islamist radicalization and terrorism have still only tentatively touched on the topic of researcher positionality in relation to access.

Terrorism studies have in general been criticized for lacking methodological transparency, which concerns the “extent to which details about the research process are provided in the manuscript” (Harris et al., 2016, pp. 603-604), e.g. information about sampling characteristics, analytic strategy, and limitations. Methodological transparency not only provides the larger research community with a frame of reference to assess research findings (Harris et al., 2016, pp. 603-604), it is also crucial particularly when attempting to access hard-to-reach populations, where new, unanswered methodological concerns and challenges constantly arise (Pawelz, 2018). One way of supporting methodological transparency is through a reflective analysis of how the researcher’s positionality influences different levels of access to the field under study (Feldman et al., 2003). Indeed, gaining access has often been understood in simplistic ways as solely opening a door, when in fact access is a continuous complex and relational process that continues throughout the research process long after the researcher has “got in” (Feldman et al., 2003; Noaks & Wincup, 2011). This is

especially the case regarding the previous research in Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies, where access problems often relate to the initial stage of searching for and recruiting potential informants (e.g. Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Hemmingsen, 2011; Weggemans et al., 2014).

Based on methodological experiences from two qualitative research projects in Denmark and Sweden relying on fieldwork (observations and interviews) within Salafi-jihadist environments, this article aims to reflect on researcher positionality in relation to access processes. Specifically, we explore and unravel how our double outsider position as non-Muslim female researchers both hindered and facilitated in: 1) the initial stage of searching for and contacting possible informants; 2) gaining further access through building trusted interpersonal relations; and 3) accessing sensitive emotional insights in the interview situation. We draw on a reflexive and immersed research approach, believing that, especially within the field of terrorism studies, dealing as it does with illicit and sensitive subject matter, attempted objectivity and detachment risk overlooking important insights rather than capturing them. Hence, we eschew a binary concept of access versus non-access, and employ an understanding of access as an ongoing process that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated in a continuous, yet precarious, process (Feldman et al., 2003; Lee, 1993; Noaks & Wincup, 2004). In a similar vein, we employ a perception of insider/outsider positions as a continuum (Miled, 2019) instead of relying on a dual understanding of these concepts. The understanding of positionality is wedded to both others' and our own ways of perceiving it. Consequently, positionality should not be confused with subjectivity: rather, positionality in qualitative research refers to a shared space between the researcher and the researched that affects the research process (Badurdeen, 2018, p. 120), and it thus represents "a space in which subjectivism and objectivism meet" (Bourke, 2014, p. 3). Contributing methodological transparency regarding researcher positionality in access processes, this article answers calls made on researchers in the field of Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies to discuss their experiences of primary research (e.g. Horgan, 2008, p. 97). Moreover, reflecting on and analyzing in depth the impact of our researcher positionality when accessing Salafi-jihadist environments, this piece of research relates to the critique of the objective and neutral researcher that was set out within social sciences more than 30 years ago.

This article proceeds by presenting an overview of the limited yet growing literature on researcher positionality in Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies. We then provide methodological background information about our research projects on which this article's conclusions rely. Subsequently, we explore how our researcher

positionality as non-Muslim female researchers has influenced different levels of access before ending with a discussion of our findings.

Researcher positionality in Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies

The significance of the researcher's positionality has long been discussed among social scientists. Some have explicitly explored the impact of the positionality of the female ethnographer when trying to gain access (e.g. Chiswell & Wheeler, 2016; Easterday et al., 1977; Golde, 1986). In criminology, scholars have long examined different issues of gaining access to hard-to-reach populations (e.g. Dunlap & Johnson, 1998; Pawelz, 2018). However, few have studied the impact of the researcher's positionality in different stages of the access process (e.g. Sumner et al., 2018; Miller, 2010). Yet some scholars have recently begun examining the influence of gender positions when female researchers attempt to gain access to and conduct research within male-dominated criminal or deviant subgroups (Bucerius & Urbanik, 2019; Bucerius, 2013; Goffman, 2014). For example, as noted by Bucerius & Urbanik (2019), both Goffman (2014) and Bucerius (2013) found that because they were women, their male participants would often disclose emotional information that the research participants would expect their male criminal peers to perceive as emasculating.

Within Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies, analyses and reflections concerning the researcher's positionality are still in their infancy. During the last decade, some scholars have started to address obstacles and potentials of the researcher's positionality for the access process (e.g. Badurdeen, 2018; de Koning et al., 2021; Greenwood, 2018; Hemmingsen, 2011; Horgan, 2012; Larsen, 2020; Necef, 2021; Nilsson, 2018; Speckhard, 2009; Speckhard & Yayla, 2016). However, these scholars have not yet developed an in-depth analysis of researcher positionality on different levels of access. Larsen (2020), who conducted interviews with "professionals" (e.g. social workers) working in the prevention of Islamist radicalization in Denmark, never succeeded in gaining access to active radicals and their relatives when studying processes of radicalization. According to some "professionals," his position as a young non-Muslim male academic would make it too hard for him to gain access to active radicals as this positioned him as too Danish "to gain real insight into the thoughts and actions of these young Muslims" (Larsen, 2020, p. 61). Larsen (2020, p. 50) finds that his outsider position as a non-urban, young ethnic majority male academic even influenced the negotiation of the concept of radicalization in interviews with social workers, and thus his access to information. In

contrast, taking an autoethnographic approach, Necef (2021) reports on how his self-disclosure of having an insider position as a convicted leftwing extremist in Turkey influenced the interview situation with a young convicted IS foreign fighter of Danish-Turkish origin in a Danish prison, in terms of accessing unique emotional, personal, and sensitive data. Necef (2021, pp. 81-82) further notes that his presumed Muslim position given his Turkish background and self-evident Muslim name must have been decisive for the access he obtained: "Besides my ex-extremist position, my ethnic and religious background contributed apparently to my being considered as an 'insider'." Necef, who is near retirement age, additionally reasons that he thinks his informant thought "it was improper, even impertinent, to examine a man about religious knowledge who was close to three times his own age." Consequently, his mature age also seemed to have a positive influence on his access to emotional insights in the interview situation (Necef, 2021, p. 82).

In her study of the recruitment of youth for the al-Shabaab terrorist organization in Kenya, Badurdeen (2018) provides an in-depth analysis of the influence of her Muslim position upon commencing fieldwork. Her Muslim position was convenient for her when gaining initial access to the community, yet her assumed insider status as a Muslim raised issues concerning the degree to which she was an insider in the sense of being either a moderate or a radical Muslim once she had entered the field. De Koning et al. (2021) likewise experienced that the Muslim position of one of the authors was an advantage for gaining access to Dutch-speaking women who had joined IS. However, the same researcher was subsequently accused by journalists of being biased in favor of jihadist sympathies because of her Muslim background. When Speckhard and Yayla (2016) conducted interviews with ISIS defectors in Turkey, Yayla's Muslim background did turn out to be an advantage. After an interview with three defectors he went to pray with them. Proclaiming his faith as an important part of his life helped in building further trust and, according to the authors, opened the door for continued interviews. In addition, owing to the trust established, one of the defectors later became their main fixer.

Speckhard (2009, p. 209), who describes herself as a "White, American, Christian woman," did not experience her gender as an obstacle when gaining access to and conducting interviews with Islamist extremists in twelve different countries. Rather, it was advantageous, as the mother and sister figure she as a woman represented appealed to most Muslims because it established a possibility for conservative Muslim men, especially, to talk in depth with a woman outside the family (Speckhard, 2009, p. 210). Further, Speckhard (2009) explains that when doing prison ethnography in Iraq

and Israel among militant jihadis, she chose to wear a headscarf or a burqa—not because she tried to be an insider, but out of respect for the prisoners she interviewed. Greenwood (2018, p. 102), who examined the processes of becoming an Islamist foreign fighter among Danish extremists, to some extent reverses this insight, as she found that the physical presence of her huge twin pregnancy postured her bodily in a “male”-way. Because she could not sit cross-legged, was taking up space and moreover was served fruit and water, this helped to level the power balance with a very dominant masculine authoritative figure in a specific interview situation. Thus, both the stereotypical performance of the female ethnographer as caring and the non-stereotypical performance as a woman taking up space were fruitful in the Speckhard and Greenwood cases, respectively.

Turning to relatives, however rich in contributing valuable knowledge on Salafi-jihadist foreign fighters from their perspective, most extant literature within this subfield does not cast light on the significance of the researcher’s positionality and its influence on access in the area. While Aasgaard (2017) offers a transparent account of her way of sampling relatives of women from Scandinavia who joined IS or the al-Nusrah front, she does not include reflections concerning her positionality. Likewise, other studies examining the jihadi foreign fighter phenomenon on the basis of qualitative inquiries among relatives also leave a gap when it comes to examining the influence of the researcher’s positionality on the access processes (see Amarasingam & Dawson, 2018; Awan & Guru, 2017; Sikkens et al., 2017; Weggemans et al., 2014; van San, 2018).

To conclude, no one has previously, in Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies, thoroughly analyzed the influence of the positionality of a non-Muslim female researcher on different levels of access. This article fills this gap.

Methodology: Researching the Salafi-jihadist environments in Denmark and Sweden

This article draws on methodological experiences from two independent research projects in Denmark (conducted by Jørgensen) and Sweden (conducted by Esholdt) on individuals with firsthand experiences of engaging in Salafi-jihadism (e.g. returned foreign fighters), as well as secondhand sources of their social milieu (e.g. relatives). Both Denmark and Sweden have housed a considerable number of individuals who left for the conflict zone in Syria or Iraq (Danish Security and Intelligence Service, 2020; Gustafsson & Ranstorp, 2017). Both studies are based on fieldwork involving face-to-face interviews and observations. Overall, we have been interested in learning about firsthand sources’ motivations for entering the Salafi-jihadist environment and the

conflict zone (e.g. IS territory), about experiences of being part of the milieu, and about how eventual desistance and return was maintained and experienced. Additionally, we also aimed at learning about these issues through secondhand sources. Yet, we set out an open and explorative approach and were basically open to anything our informants were willing to share with us.

A decade ago, Hemmingsen (2011, p. 3) recognized that access problems to Salafi-jihadist environments existed but that they were not “insurmountable.” Ten years later, the frictions are not only still present, they have also become nearly insurmountable. Confirmed by insiders from the field, colleagues and journalists with connections to firsthand sources, a self-closure of the field was intensified especially around 2015/2016. At this point, among other factors, the adoption of “anti-terrorism laws” in Denmark and Sweden led to fear of potential legal sanctions among Salafi-jihadists and contributed to an almost hermetic sealing of the milieus. Indeed, these obstacles have left significant imprints on our access processes. Accordingly, we set out various sampling strategies.

In line with standards for recruiting people from hard-to-reach populations (Pawelz, 2018), we both started by mapping out all possible actors (journalists, lawyers, social workers, municipality workers, imams, authors, documentarists, researchers, and public debaters) who would potentially know gatekeepers and/or first- or secondhand sources either personally or professionally. From here we started contacting gatekeepers, firsthand and secondhand sources. We usually approached people by calling them, if telephone numbers were available, or by sending them an email or letter, or through social media platforms. Besides this, we also approached people with whom we became acquainted as part of our fieldwork, e.g. when observing trials or attending conferences and meetings with potential informants. We undertook snowball sampling (Lee, 1995) to the extent possible, implying that we contacted gatekeepers, who in some instances helped us to gain new contacts, who again helped us getting new connections. However, in line with what Lee (1993) has pointed out, sampling did not always roll like a snowball gaining more and more contacts, but was instead rather slow and halting, and sometimes we even got the feeling that the ball was beginning to roll backwards. Jørgensen, for example, was once provided with a phone number but was not allowed to say where she got the number from, which to potential new informants put her in a suspicious position.

In addition to the undertaking of fieldwork as a way of recruiting informants, fieldwork has been conducted to explore the field. Altogether, we have carried out ethnography

through the observation of trials, by visiting mosques, and by attending seminars and conferences with practitioners, relatives, and returnees. Because of the subject’s illicit character, interviews have not been easy to schedule, and encounters and conversations with (potential) informants sometimes happened “on the go” during fieldwork. For instance, Jørgensen once went to an invited seminar on (de)radicalization efforts as part of her fieldwork. During the seminar, a woman who had joined IS and later returned gave an anonymous talk about her time in the Caliphate and her return to Denmark. Jørgensen was given the opportunity to ask questions, and the fieldwork suddenly took the form of an informal interview outside the traditional interview setting. Nilsson (2018, p. 423) notes that such experiences position the researcher in a gray zone where “one should be aware that diminishing power, expressed by the researcher’s lack of control of the interview situation, will be replaced by increasing ethnographic privilege.” Interviews that border on ethnographic research may thus hold the potential of yielding rich data. Before attending the seminar, Jørgensen had tried to gain initial access to the female IS returnee through a gatekeeper with whom she had a trusted relationship. Yet, the woman did not agree to let the gatekeeper pass on her contact information to Jørgensen. Thus, in the situation described, the ethnographic approach did indeed lead to an encounter with an informant who would have been hard to access otherwise. The sensitive nature of the subject also implied that it was not ideal for us to employ already developed guidelines for interviewing within this field (see e.g. Khalil, 2019), just as it was impossible to strictly follow a structured or semi-structured interview guide. Instead, we had to slowly tune in to our participants and sense what would be appropriate to ask, what would not, how far we could go down a trajectory, and when we should stop or make a turn. All names, places and other information that could make an individual recognizable have been anonymized.

For this article, we have limited the analysis to focus on the influence of our non-Muslim female researcher positionality on the access processes and thus only included data to illustrate this. Indeed, different aspects of the researcher’s positionality can prove more or less hard to separate from each other (Miller, 2010). Hence, examining only gender and religiosity relies on an analytical distinction.

Findings: Gaining and maintaining access as non-Muslim female researchers

In the following, we explore how our researcher positionality as non-Muslim females manifested in the field and affected the access processes in various ways. We outline a

three-pronged structure mirroring the continuous and dynamic process of gaining access (Feldman et al., 2003). In the first section, we examine how our position as non-Muslim female researchers influenced the initial stage of gaining access to gatekeepers as well as firsthand and secondhand sources. In the second section, we analyze how our positionality affected further access to building trusted interpersonal relations with informants and gatekeepers. Finally, in the third section, we analyze the influence of our positionality on accessing sensitive emotional insights in the interview situation.

A foot in the door: The initial search and contact stage

During Esholdt's fieldwork, two police officers agreed to help her get in touch with a returned IS foreign fighter they knew of. Later, however, they became reluctant to help, because they judged it would be too difficult to mediate the contact as the male returnee, according to the police officers, did not "want to talk to or have anything to do with women." Because gatekeepers ascribe sensitivity to certain research topics beforehand, it is not unusual, as described by Åkerström and Wästerfors (2018), that gatekeepers block access to possible informants, even without asking them whether they would participate in an interview or not, or at least letting the researcher herself present her research project to potential informants. Indeed, gender segregation—a sensitive topic—characterizes the Salafi-jihadist environment, but the gatekeepers never asked the male returnee if he would be interested in talking with a female researcher. In another situation, Esholdt intended to establish contact with the father of two deceased male IS foreign fighters, but ended up desisting. When she tried to make contact through a social media platform, Esholdt learnt that the father, who himself appeared to support radical Islam, had paid tribute on social media to the martyr's deaths of his sons. Moreover, a social worker told Esholdt that the father, besides having four wives, did not want to shake hands with or say hello to female teachers during the sons' years in school. Esholdt, who interpreted this as an expression of ways of life in accordance with a patriarchal gender order, therefore assessed the probability that the father would talk with a female, and even non-Muslim, researcher as very low. In addition, Esholdt felt uncomfortable, and because she was at the time at the beginning of her fieldwork, she was very aware of acting carefully and not putting herself at risk, which also influenced her decision to discontinue the process of trying to obtain initial access to the father. Gatekeepers also occasionally communicated the perception that Jørgensen's female position would potentially be a hindrance in the initial access process. When Jørgensen, for example, was introduced to a potential informant through a gatekeeper, Riad, whom she had

met through a journalist, he warned her that people from the milieu could be “quite tough.” Riad offered to stay in close proximity to Jørgensen during the meeting with her potential source, and asked her to give a sign afterwards. Riad did not directly relate this to the fact that Jørgensen is a woman. However, he told her about his boxing skills, which gave her the impression that he was relying on the stereotypical perception of women being physically inferior to men, and thus offering to protect Jørgensen physically. After Jørgensen had met with her new potential source, she called Riad to tell him she was fine.

In other situations, we became aware of the openings our female position supported in the initial access phase. Esholdt could not, as a woman, enter the men’s section in a Swedish mosque she had been told had connections to the Swedish Salafi-jihadist environment, but was welcome to go into the women’s section. In addition, some gatekeepers did see our female position as an advantage. A gatekeeper once told Jørgensen that he thought one of the returned foreign fighters he knew would find it “nice to talk with a young woman like [her].” This seemed to refer to the expected pleasure of simply talking with a young woman. However, the male returnee was about to enter an exit program, and it thus also seemed probable that the gatekeeper saw potential in presenting the returned foreign fighter to a non-Muslim female representing a Western, liberated gender view. Likewise, Esholdt even experienced getting a tip from a female gatekeeper that, if attempting to recruit specific pro-IS men online (in order to try to arrange interviews with them), she should put a “good-looking picture” of herself on her social media account. This would work, according to the gatekeeper, because “all men want to talk to nice women.” Just as the picture could be seen as a form of “character display,” where the researcher uses strategies of self-presentation to try to fit into the setting (van Maanen, 1982), which would presumably increase the likelihood of gaining initial access, we considered other ways of strategically using our position as women through character display. In line with Greenwood (2018), Esholdt considered bringing her son when going to places that had been identified to her by gatekeepers as places where relatives of some deceased IS foreign fighters often “hung out.” Esholdt reasoned that bringing a child would help her in making initial contact, as she would just appear as a woman with her child, hence not “risky” or “dangerous” to start a conversation with. As seen from the examples, gatekeepers, as well as us as female researchers, were “doing gender” (cf. West & Zimmerman, 1987) in the initial access phase. As indicated by Bucerius & Urbanik (2019), it may sometimes be necessary as a researcher to play along with stereotypical gender views and not oppose them when trying to permeate an almost

impermeable field and gain initial access. As Sultana (2007, p. 380) points out, dealing with power relations where the female researcher is "being placed in a particular understanding of what women are or should be" entails that one must sometimes make a patriarchal bargain in negotiating between getting research done and not offending respondents or, in our case, gatekeepers. We made such bargains, e.g. when potential sources had radical gender views and we decided to discontinue the access process. Most of the time, however, we prioritized the importance of trying to get data and did not oppose stereotypical gender views.

As part of our snowball sampling, we contacted and convened meetings with other researchers within the field. None of them were gatekeepers or communicated any contacts, but they were willing to share some of their sampling experiences. From these researchers we learned that it was easier for researchers with a Muslim background to succeed in establishing contact with sources than it was for non-Muslim researchers. To give an example, a Muslim female researcher explained to Jørgensen that "it really helps to be an insider" when trying to gain access, especially to female firsthand sources within the field. Another researcher with a Muslim background reported to Jørgensen that she finally succeeded in getting access because men with Muslim backgrounds "wanted to help their Muslim sisters." Polsky (2007 [1967], p. 124) has advised that in doing field research on hard-to-reach populations, you should "*not* pretend to be 'one of them'," because they will be testing you all the way, which can be fatal if you get exposed. Consequently, although we did find that our non-Muslim position created obstacles in the initial phase, we concluded that trying to appear as a (converted) Muslim sister, for example by wearing a burqa, would question our trustworthiness. A gatekeeper told Esholdt that once people from the Swedish Salafi-jihadist environment encountered her and found out that Esholdt is of Danish background, they would just associate her with the Muhammad cartoons from the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* in 2005. This clearly indicated that Esholdt, who is not able to disguise her Danish accent and moreover does not resemble the stereotypical image of a Muslim woman, as she does not wear a headscarf, for instance, would not be perceived on first impression as an Islam-friendly person—rather the opposite. Additionally, Esholdt one day had an appointment in a mosque with an imam (she later learned he was part of the Swedish Salafi-jihadist environment), who had agreed to meet with her and possibly act as a gatekeeper. Esholdt had made it very clear to the imam that she was not a Muslim herself, and asked whether it would be okay for her to come to the mosque, whereupon the imam had assured Esholdt that "everybody is welcome in the mosque." In the end, however,

the imam did not show up, and a police officer later told Esholdt that the imam might not want to meet with her because he might be pressured by some radical forces in the mosque who, according to the police officer, would say: "She is a woman, she is an unbeliever—you should not meet with her." Another time, a gatekeeper told Esholdt that she could forget about interviewing relatives of foreign fighters who had Muslim backgrounds, because they live isolated in deprived areas and do not trust anyone who is not a Muslim.

Being a non-Muslim seems, however, also to have smoothed access to particular parts of the field. Later on in the interview situation, some of our non-Muslim informants (e.g. relatives of jihadi foreign fighters who had converted to Islam) demonstrated distance towards radical forms of Islam and some even towards Islam in general. Jørgensen established contact with Annie, a non-Muslim mother of Danish origin whose son became a foreign fighter, and who later, in the interview situation, demonstrated a distanced attitude towards radical Islam. Jørgensen did not know of this when she contacted Annie through the only possible channel, a social media platform. It is hard to say if Annie would have refused to be interviewed had Jørgensen had a Muslim background. Nonetheless, contacting Annie through social media gave her an opportunity to check out Jørgensen's non-Muslim position, and this may have been advantageous for gaining initial access to non-Muslims like Annie. Additionally, a distanced attitude towards radical Islam can probably be challenging to express to a researcher with a (moderate) Muslim background, as the informant could feel insecure regarding how strong the Muslim researcher is in the faith or how the Koran is interpreted. In a similar vein, Badurdeen (2018) struggled to convince her radical Muslim informants that she was a moderate, not radical, Muslim.

All in all, our female position thus influenced the initial access process through negotiations between either opposing a radical or stereotypical gender view and discontinuing the access process or playing along with such views and carrying on. The radical Islamist gender view constituted a major hindrance when attempting to access men in the environment, and when directly confronted with the environment's patriarchal gender order we did not usually continue attempting to gain further access. When we encountered stereotypical gender views, we most often continued the process. Additionally, our non-Muslim position to some extent clearly positioned us as outsiders, challenging the initial access process. However, once having got a "foot in the door" the process of gaining access continued by building trusted interpersonal relations, which we examine below.

Gaining further access: Building trusted interpersonal relations

Although Esholdt's position as a woman allowed her to physically enter the women's section of a Swedish mosque with connections to the Swedish Salafi-jihadi environment, she still had to work on gaining relational access to the women inside the mosque so that they would possibly help Esholdt in reaching the imam, whom, as described above, she was there to meet with. When Esholdt entered the mosque, she met two young girls wearing black abayas:

I smile at them and kindly ask if I should put my shoes on the shelf. They say that you have to. They seem friendly, but also look a little surprised that I'm there. After I have taken off my shoes, I enter the next room. Here I introduce myself to the two girls. I reach out my hand to the girls and say "Henriette." The girls seem a little surprised and reluctant, but smile back at me, reach out their hands to me, and say their names. I explain to them that I have an appointment with the imam, but I did not meet him outside. Instead I met two men who told me that I could just go into the women's section and wait until the imam showed up. The girls seem to accept this as a legitimate reason why I am there. I don't tell them that I am a researcher, because I do not want to "scare" the girls away by bringing up such a sensitive topic as Salafi-jihadism as I had just entered the door. Besides, I had already told the imam about my research project. I neatly put my bag away, and the girls make a sign to me that I can just come in and sit on the carpet. One of the girls smiles at me and asks, "Are you a Muslim?" I reply, "No, I'm not." "Okay," she answers, looking a little confused. I get the impression that they are not used to having non-Muslim visitors in the mosque. (Esholdt's field notes)

The fact that the girls wanted to check whether Esholdt was a Muslim, which Esholdt had to say no to, indicated that she was clearly positioned as an outsider. Furthermore, the question of whether one is Muslim or not did seem to be important to the girls, and Esholdt sensed that she would have to work on becoming a "trusted outsider" (cf. Bucerius, 2013) in order to make them willing to help her getting access to the imam, and possibly later to also confide in her despite her non-Muslim position if Esholdt found that they could work as informants themselves. As noted by Polsky (2007 [1967], p. 135) building rapport and studying deviant environments in their natural settings entails an unstructured, fluid research process where the subject under study cannot be "scheduled" and the researcher has to adjust to the shifting circumstances and situations. Consequently, Esholdt strategically decided to take advantage of the situation by "hanging out" in the mosque in order to see if it could lead to any

arrangements. Esholdt started chatting with the girls, and opened up about being a researcher. While talking to the girls, a speaker suddenly turned on:

I look up spontaneously and see that there are speakers in the corners of the ceiling. "Now we must pray," says one of the girls. I ask the girls if I should go. "No, no, just stay seated," one of the girls says. The other girl is sitting down on the floor, mostly preoccupied with her cellphone, and apparently not praying. An older male voice begins to preach in the speakers. All I understand is "Allahu Akbar." When the prayer is over, I ask the girls if the voice preaching is really from a person sitting right next door in the men's section, or whether it is a tape recorder. The girls say that a man is sitting in the men's section and preaching. I ask the girl who did not pray why she didn't pray. The other girl answers on her behalf that when a woman has her period, she should not pray. (Esholdt's field notes)

Even though Esholdt as a non-Muslim did, to some extent, seem to be an outsider in this context, her positionality as a non-Muslim was nonetheless a privileged one, as it allowed her to take on the role of the naïf in the field (cf. Corsino, 1987). This implied that she was allowed to learn about the Muslim environment in the mosque through asking the girls all kinds of "silly" questions about their daily and religious practices in the mosque. Their explaining details about their religiosity to Esholdt gave her access to start building a trustful interpersonal relationship with the girls, although the encounter with the girls did not end with any interview arrangements at this point.

In contrast to Esholdt's experience, Jørgensen was—despite her double outsider position—invited to the men's section of a mosque. She was introduced to the mosque by Hafez, who had contacts in the Danish Salafi-jihadi milieu and acted both as a secondary source and as a potential gatekeeper. Access seemed to be closely wedded to a long process of engaging in trust-building activities in advance. Before visiting the men's section, Jørgensen and Hafez had met twice, and Hafez had told Jørgensen about a woman that he had recently met. The woman had stumbled into the mosque one day drunk and tried to kiss him. He handled the situation by "just driving her home," as he explained. Additionally, he told Jørgensen that he previously used to date a lot of women, but that those times were over because he was now married. At the second meeting, Hafez, who thought of Jørgensen's project as a book, told her: "Next time we can talk, we go for dinner—you pay [smiling] and then I will help you with your book." Through what Jørgensen interpreted to be a self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), Hafez communicated a change in his gender view, moving to a less patriarchal,

more liberated, Western gender view akin to the one Jørgensen represented. In addition, he presented himself as an attractive, non-dangerous man who drives the drunk woman home instead of exploiting her. Furthermore, it is imaginable that Hafez expected that Jørgensen would assume him to have a more patriarchal gender view due to her outsider position, and he therefore used the opportunity to challenge her view of men within the field and to disprove that he held this view himself (cf. Miller, 2010). Hafez thus used gender in his self-presentation, trying to appear trustworthy to Jørgensen, and her female position indirectly affected the trust-building process. That being said, Jørgensen had to show trust as well, and the following field note describes how the visit to a restaurant and later the mosque turned out as trust-building activities:

Hafez and I went to a local, casual restaurant for dinner. After a while, I tried to broach the subject of foreign fighters, returnees and my research project. "First, we eat, we have a coffee, we go back to the mosque, and then we talk," he replied in a determined, firm tone. After several dishes, we drove back to the mosque in his car. Entering the prayer room, I found a chair along the wall. Some men cast a skeptical glance at me; others ignored my presence, some nodded in my direction, and a few men shook my hand after Hafez had introduced me. The minaret sounded, and around 40-50 men were standing in a line with their backs towards me, beginning to pray. I looked around. I was the only woman and the only non-Muslim. I wondered whether I should leave; was I even allowed to be present and observe what seemed to be a men-only prayer? I lifted my woolen scarf, covered my hair, and decided to stay. After the prayer, Hafez and I went to his car, which was in an isolated parking lot. He asked me to turn off my phone and did the same himself. He turned off the lights: "So, now you can ask me anything," he said. We talked for more than an hour, and Hafez cursorily told me about foreign fighters' motivations for going to and leaving the conflict zone, but he also told me that the persons he knew of were either dead or not interested in talking with anyone outside the milieu. He did not show willingness to try to mediate contacts at this time, but said we could meet again. (Jørgensen's field notes)

What Jørgensen beforehand expected to constitute obstacles (being a non-Muslim woman in the men's section of a mosque) did not interrupt the access process, and Jørgensen was not excluded due to her non-Muslim female position. However, Jørgensen underwent "trust tests" (Lee, 1993, p. 139), as she was placed in a compromising and difficult situation to see how she would react. The trust tests (both at the restaurant and in the mosque) entailed that Jørgensen was put in situations

where she had to manage her positionality in ways she could not have planned in advance. Just as Hamm (2018, p. 200) dresses in "suits, white shirts and black ties ... out of respect for the convicts who agree to sit for interviews" and thereby to establish a good relationship with his informants, Jørgensen, by covering her hair, attempted to show a respectful attitude towards the norms within the field and create trust with the men. Thus, character display as described by Lee (1993) became a way of minimizing the social distance between the researcher and the subject. By managing her positionality, Jørgensen made an effort to increase the chances that trust would be built and access to the relationship with Hafez maintained and developed. Indeed, a trusted relationship was established, but not to the extent Jørgensen hoped for.

In other situations, the management of our positionality during trust tests as a way of gaining further access did not seem to be an option. Jørgensen once succeeded, after a few phone calls and a short chat correspondence, in establishing initial contact with a Muslim male, Jabbar, who had previously shown a positive attitude towards stoning of women. Jabbar had contacts in the Danish Salafi-jihadi milieu, and Jørgensen thus hoped he could act as her gatekeeper. She visited Jabbar at his private address. They talked for more than an hour; Jørgensen was served tea and cookies by Jabbar's wife and was even introduced to some of his other family members. Jabbar yawned, said he was tired and was only willing to talk about general issues with IS foreign fighters. He did not show a hostile attitude towards non-Muslim women like Jørgensen during the interview, but, on the basis of her background knowledge, she could not stop thinking that maybe his unwillingness to open up had to do with her position as a non-Muslim female outsider. Even though Jørgensen found herself in Jabbar's private house, they were far from building a trusted relationship. Jørgensen felt vulnerable in the situation because of her positionality, and since Jabbar did not show openness to helping Jørgensen, she reasoned time was better spent trying to establish access elsewhere and she decided to discontinue the access process.

To sum up, building trust to gain further access is a prolonged and precarious process, and reaching a position as an approved "trusted outsider" required time and effort. Nilsson (2018) describes how drinking tea with his (potential) informants was an essential part of building trust. What turned out to be significant in our cases was to manage our non-Muslim female position to become "trusted outsiders," perform character display in accordance with our positionality, undergo trust tests, spend time participating in and observing our informants' everyday life activities, and to make sure to stay in touch (e.g. via phone calls, ongoing email conversations, or via encrypted message channels). In many situations this brought us to a new level of

access. Below, we analyze the way our positionality hereafter influenced the access to sensitive emotional insights in the interview situation.

Accessing sensitive emotional insights in the interview situation

Gaining access to the field in the form of generating new data entails, as we have just exemplified, a long preceding process of approval as someone that can be trusted (Lee, 1993), and the process of getting in and building trust affects the data available to the researcher (Feldman et al., 2003). However, a trusted relationship does not guarantee access to the kind of new information, sensitive knowledge, and data generation that is relevant for the particular research purpose (Feldman et al., 2003). Likewise, conducting an interview is not sufficient if relevant questions are not answered (Miller-Adams & Myers, 2003).

After nearly two and a half years and many unsuccessful attempts to access relatives, Esholdt finally conducted an interview with Pernilla, the mother of a deceased IS foreign fighter, with, at the request of the mother, a female police officer present, who had functioned as gatekeeper and had worked on the case with the mother's child. Esholdt had almost given up on trying to access relatives in order to understand their family members' motivations for joining Salafi-jihadist milieus. In her despair she had told the police officer that she at least wanted to try to understand the relatives' experiences of threats, not feeling well and feeling shameful, which during her fieldwork had so often been offered to Esholdt as explanations for not wanting to participate in research. Expressing that she cared about the relatives' feelings turned out to be a breakthrough. In the "female space" constituted by the female gatekeeper, Esholdt and the mother, Pernilla, who to begin with had been reluctant and insecure, started to open up. She revealed a family story with intense physical violence, emotional violence, and even honor-related social control, which, according to her, was essential for understanding her son's descent into jihadi foreign fighting. Esholdt's position as a non-Muslim may also have played a role. The mother was of Swedish origin and had converted to Islam when she was young. After many years of wearing a burqa and practicing a radical interpretation of Islam herself, she had recently, after her son's father had died, started to wear only a headscarf and practice a more moderate interpretation of Islam. Esholdt, appearing to hold a liberal, Western gender view from her non-Muslim female position, may have helped the mother to disclose information regarding the violent relationship and to express distance to the radical interpretations of Islam concerning gender.

Likewise, the fact that all involved in the interview were women also seemed to support a conversation concerning yet another sensitive and taboo topic—namely, whether or not you are “allowed” to mourn over someone who did something as morally reprehensible as joining a terrorist organization. The mother expressed that she was not sure if she could forgive her son for joining IS. By taking a stereotypical female stance as caring, understanding, and listening, Esholdt accessed some sensitive emotional insights when witnessing the following conversation between the mother and the police officer, in which the mother made some profound self-confessions:

Pernilla: When SÄPO [The Swedish Security Service] went to my place I told them straight out: “I don’t think so [that he should be able to return]. If he has chosen it, he has chosen it. No further discussion.” That is also my opinion today. I had a friend who said: “You don’t know how the situation is down there ... some of them [foreign fighters] may have regretted it and just want to come home.” ... I don’t know ... So I’m still a little tough with this opinion. I say: “No, if you went, you went.”

Police officer: There is some resemblance to your own story. ... You paid tribute to Osama bin Laden, you paid tribute to 9/11. Should we then judge you according to that, or should we say “Pernilla, you have the right to regret”?

Pernilla: Pernilla, you have the right to regret.

Police officer: Then you can ask if others have the right to regret? I will not force that opinion on you. What I’m saying is just that I’m glad you regretted it and that we got to know each other and that you did not get stuck. If I had told you that you were an asshole then maybe you would still be stuck and have those opinions.

Pernilla: Hmm, that is true.

Police officer: And you had gotten more people into it.

Pernilla: That is true.

Police officer: You are worth another life, despite you having said those stupid things.

Pernilla: When you put it like that, you actually have a point. ... I will probably take back what I said.

Police officer: If your son had still been alive and was still down there and had the chance to come home and regret it ..., I would have welcomed him.

Pernilla: Thank you.

(Esholdt's interview with Pernilla)

During the interview, the police officer encouraged and supported the mother in showing private photos of her son—from before he joined IS—to Esholdt, something that was very hard for the mother. After the interview, the mother rose from her chair, reached out to Esholdt, and gave her a huge hug before she left. Esholdt interpreted this as an expression that the meeting had been a rewarding experience for the mother. The "female space" which the interview situation provided supported Pernilla's situational disclosure (cf. Boethius & Åkerström, 2020) of personal, sensitive, and intimate information about a relationship that was violent in several ways, just as it led to a self-awareness about her own role in her son's radicalization process, which seemed to help her in forgiving him.

Access to sensitive emotional knowledge relevant to the research purpose was also obtained in interviews with non-Muslim female relatives of jihadi foreign fighters. In the following field note, Jørgensen describes a meeting with the mother, Sonja, of an IS foreign fighter, Morten, during which Jørgensen gained access to Sonja's emotional, personal accounts of her son's transition to a radical Muslim. Before the interview, confidence had been built through both email correspondence and telephone conversations. As Jørgensen showed up and the door was opened, Sonja looked at her as if she was a complete stranger:

"Oh, I totally forgot our appointment." Sonja explained. "Come inside, but I only have 40 minutes." I felt a bit disappointed: I had traveled a long way and spent much time preparing for the interview. Sonja welcomed me and made coffee, then she explained: "Actually, I didn't forget, but I was afraid that it would rake up some things for me that I would have to go back and talk about it [her son's descent into Islamist extremism]." Before entering the conflict zone, Sonja explains, her son had traveled to another country, where she visited him. "Could you feel some of the old Morten when you visited him?" I asked. "No. There was nothing left of the old Morten. There wasn't. What they do in Islam is that they say, 'there is a life before Islam and after Islam and all the old stuff just has to be forgotten'," she replied, and her eyes got wet. She continued telling me about her experiences with having a son join the Salafi-jihadist environment, while crying.

Before leaving, I asked her if she had a picture of Morten. She showed me several pictures, and I responded that he looked happy and sweet, and that I was sure that she was a very good mother to him. Then she started crying again and said "thank you." Before leaving I gave her a hug. (Jørgensen's field notes)

Jørgensen and Sonja shared the same non-Muslim cultural context, and Jørgensen was also shocked that a person could convert to extremism and turn one's back on the family. Complimenting Sonja's role toward her son may have contributed to establishing an emotional bond. Common to the described experiences made by Esholdt and Jørgensen is that 'emotional labor' was undertaken in building rapport and maintaining access (Blix & Wettergren, 2015). Comfort was an essential part of the interview situations which seemed to indicate that candor and sensitive information had been shared.

Annie, who was skeptical towards radical Islam, shared sensitive thoughts on this topic with Jørgensen. After her son started to engage in Islamist extremism, his radical Muslim lifestyle provoked her more and more. In the quote below, Annie reports on a situation where her son unexpectedly shows up at her house after a long period with no visits. Annie asks him why he suddenly comes to visit her:

And then he said: "That's something Allah has said," and then I said: "Fuck Allah." I got so damn crazy. Then he just stood there like - I have never seen him like that before, like he would hit me. Then I said: "You just don't do that. If you do, I'll call the police." And then, somehow, I managed to kick his shoe out of the door, and he then had to pick it up, and then I could slam the door. ... At that point I really went nuts. (Jørgensen's interview with Annie)

Conducting fieldwork among young jihadists, Badurdeen (2018, pp. 127-128) had to remain cautious when encountering a wish among her radical informants to know whether her religious stance was "that of a moderate or a radical Muslim." In a similar vein, however not balancing between being a moderate or a radical Muslim, Jørgensen felt a need to pay careful attention to balancing an understanding, empathetic attitude with a somewhat neutral and not Islam-hostile attitude, as she did not want the latter to influence Annie negatively and cause an interruption of access to relevant and sensitive insights. Being understanding towards emotionally harsh parts of what Annie said then turned out to be a way for Jørgensen to manage her non-Muslim position in a neutral, yet comforting way in order to maintain access to sensitive emotional insights.

Jørgensen also found that, when conducting interviews with male primary sources who had been part of the Salafi-jihadist environment, they would disclose information regarding the emotionally tough parts of their past that had, in their eyes, originally led them towards the Salafi-jihadist environment. For example, they told Jørgensen quite sensitive stories about their family affairs: parents’ divorces, bereavements in the family, and how they felt they had been treated unjustly by the staff at educational institutions. This comfortability was probably facilitated by Jørgensen’s female position (see also Bucerius & Urbanik, 2019). In contrast to the interview situations with the female relatives, Jørgensen did not show physical comfort in the form of giving hugs, and the two male respondents did not at any point cry. Jørgensen did feel that it was somehow easier to identify with the female relatives than with the male firsthand sources, and her own perception of the informants’ gendered and religious positions may thus also have influenced access to specific sensitive insights in the interview situation.

Access to sensitive emotional insights somehow seemed to rely on a stereotypical perception of femininity where we reverted to our female roles as part of gaining this access. Emotional labor is typically something expected of and done by women, and being “comforting” and “soft” are labels typically bestowed upon women (Bucerius & Urbanik, 2019; Hoffmann, 2007; Hochschild, 1979). The fact that our informants gave us access to highly sensitive insights may have been linked to their perceptions of us as someone reacting to their emotional accounts in a soft, comprehending, and comforting way. It seemed that the female—and sometimes non-Muslim position—opened the way to a quite intimate sharing of information in the interview situation, not necessarily because we were women, but because we “crafted female identities” (Bucerius & Urbanik, 2019). Because trust was already established, it seemed that our outsider status resulted in richer information, as the social distance may have elicited “explanations that are assumed to be known by someone with insider status” (Taylor et al., 1995, p. 36, as cited in Miller, 2010).

Concluding discussion

This article answers calls (Harris et al., 2016; Horgan, 2008) for scholars to provide explicit and transparent accounts of their methods when conducting empirically based research within Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies. Specifically, it contributes an ethnographic account of accessing Salafi-jihadist environments in Denmark and Sweden as non-Muslim female researchers. Below, we conclude and discuss our contribution and the implications of our findings.

Indeed, access is much more than merely opening a door, which it has so often been associated with when identifying access problems. As we have argued, our researcher positionality both thwarted and assisted in gaining access at different levels. First, our female, non-Muslim position would usually constitute a hindrance to our gaining initial access to men in the Salafi-jihadist environment because of the radical, patriarchal gender view and hostile attitude towards non-Muslims that characterizes the milieu. Therefore, merely showing up without having a gatekeeper mediating contact beforehand would usually hamper the access process unless alternative openings were offered, e.g. entering the women’s section in a mosque instead of the men’s. Other scholars have reported that their Muslim background, or at least appearing to possibly be one on first impression, assisted them in gaining access to violent Islamist extremists (Badurdeen, 2018; de Koning et al., 2021; Necef 2021). However, being a Muslim or a male may not solve the access problems but add new ones (cf. Badurdeen, 2018; Larsen, 2020). While encountering many obstacles in the initial phase, playing along with stereotypical gender views turned out to be a supportive strategy for establishing a meeting or getting a telephone number. That too resonates with previous findings (Greenwood, 2018; Speckhard, 2009). Second, through trust tests and character display, we managed our positionality in accordance with the research situation and in a respectful manner, which often contributed to establishing trust. Joining potential informants and gatekeepers in their everyday activities and staying in close contact was part of building trust, which parallels other findings (Greenwood, 2018; Nilsson, 2018; Sheikh, 2016; Speckhard, 2009). Finally, being a non-Muslim female researcher proved advantageous for gaining access to sensitive emotional insights in the interview situation—especially among female informants. This third level of access was gained through an undertaking of emotional labor in accordance with stereotypical perceptions of women as, for example, providing comfort. Larsen (2020) experienced that his non-Muslim status positioned him as too “Danish” to gain initial access. On the contrary, we experienced that our non-Muslim female position at the stage of gaining access to insights in the interview situation positioned us as “Scandinavian” and non-Muslim enough to obtain sensitive emotional insights.

To conclude, the position as a non-Muslim female researcher was not only wedded to constraints and challenges at different stages of access. It also opened the way to an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the Salafi-jihadist environment. The way we had to handle gendered and religious dynamics as part of our management of positionality (respecting informant’s norms, showing comforting, yet not too involved, attitudes) in different access stages adds new knowledge to the methodological discussions on

access and transparency within the field of Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies. Because researcher positionality matters in empirically based Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies, this article underlines the importance of setting out a reflective research approach in line with the efforts that were undertaken in the wake of the ‘crisis of representation’ within the social sciences more than 30 years ago. Thus, we end by encouraging researchers of diverse positions and different backgrounds to engage in empirically based studies in order to be able to illuminate the Salafi-jihadist environment in all its diversity, depth, and complexity.

Implications

All in all, this paper provides some initial suggestions for how the researcher’s positionality can be taken into consideration when undertaking empirically based research within hard-to-reach populations, specifically in Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies and more broadly within qualitative criminology. Even though quantitative criminology does not bring the researcher’s positionality into play to the same extent, our findings suggest that the positionality of the quantitative researcher may probably also be of significance when people receive surveys and are asked to complete those. The methodological transparency regarding researcher positionality will further serve as valuable for future counter violent extremism policies and prevention programs as positionality of professionals (e.g. social workers) working with deradicalization will most likely also play a role in social interactions when it comes to building trust and accessing knowledge at various levels.

References

- Aasgaard, A. (2017). Scandinavia’s Daughters in the Syrian Civil War: What can we Learn from their Family Members’ Lived Experiences? *Journal for Deradicalization*, 13, 243-275.
- Adler, P., A., & Adler, P. (1987). *Qualitative Research Methods: Membership roles in field research*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Amarasingam, A., & Dawson, L., L. (2018). *“I left to be closer to Allah”—Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends* (Report No. 1141069). ISD.
- Atkinson, B. J., & Heath, A. W. (1990). The Limits of Explanation and Evaluation. *Family Process*, 29(2), 164-167.

Awan, I., & Guru, S. (2017). Parents of foreign “terrorist” fighters in Syria – will they report their young? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(1), 24-42.

Badurdeen, F. A. (2018). Insider-outsider reflections on terrorism research in the coastal region of Kenya. In A.-M. Rivas & B. C. Browne (Eds.), *Experiences in researching conflict and violence* (pp. 119-134). Bristol University Press.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219-234.

Blix, S. B. & Wettergren, Å. (2015). The emotional labour of gaining and maintaining access to the field. *Qualitative Research*, 15(6), 688-704.

Boethius, S., & Åkerström, M. (2020). Revealing hidden realities: Disclosing domestic abuse to informal others. *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, 21(2), 186-202.

Bucerius, S. M. (2013). Becoming a “Trusted Outsider”: Gender, Ethnicity, and Inequality in Ethnographic Research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 42(6), 690-721.

Bucerius, S., M., & Urbanik, M. (2019). When Crime Is a “Young Man’s Game” and the Ethnographer Is a Woman: Gendered Researcher Experiences in Two Different Contexts. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 48(4), 451-481.

Chiswell, H. M., & Wheeler, R. (2016). ‘As long as you’re easy on the eye’: Reflecting on issues of positionality and researcher safety during farmer interviews. *Area*, 48(2), 229-235.

Clifford, J., & Marcus, G., E. (1986). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press.

Corsino, L. (1987). *Fieldworker Blues: Emotional Stress and Research Under involvement in Fieldwork Settings*. *The Social Science Journal*, 24(3), 275-285.

Danish Security and Intelligence Service. (2020). *Vurdering af terrortruslen mod Danmark* [Assessment of the terror threat against Denmark]. Danish Security and Intelligence Service.

de Koning, M, Moors, A., & Navest, A. (2021). On speaking, remaining silent and being heard: Framing research, positionality and publics in the jihadi field. In Günther, C. &

Pfeifer, S. (Eds.), *Jihadi audiovisuality and its entanglements - Meanings, aesthetics, appropriations* (pp. 27-50). Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

Dolnik, A. (2013). Introduction—The Need for Field Research on Terrorism. In Dolnik, A (ed.), *Conducting Terrorism Field Research—A Guide* (pp. 1-11). Routledge.

Dunlap, E., & Johnson, B. D. (1998). Gaining Access to Hidden Populations: Strategies for Gaining Cooperation of Drug Sellers/Dealers and Their Families in Ethnographic Research. *Drugs & Society*, 14(1-2), 127-149.

Easterday, L., Papademas, D., Schorr, L., & Valentine, C. (1977). The Making of a Female Researcher: Role Problems in Field Work. *Urban Life*, 6(3), 333-348.

Feldman, M., S., Bell, J., & Berger, M. T. (2003). *Gaining access: A practical and theoretical guide for qualitative researchers*. AltaMira Press.

Goffman, A. (2014). *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City (Fieldwork Encounters and Discoveries)*. University of Chicago Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books.

Golde, P. (1986). *Women in the field: Anthropological experiences*. University of California Press.

Greenwood, M., T. (2018). *Becoming a Foreign Fighter - The Ethics and Agency of Fighting Jihad*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Copenhagen]. *Department of Political Science*.

Gustafsson, L., & Ranstorp, M. (2017). *Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Center for Assymetric Threat Studies.

Hamm, M., S. (2018). Using prison ethnography in terrorism research. In S. K. Rice & M. D. Maltz (Eds.), *Doing Ethnography in Criminology. Discovery through Fieldwork* (pp. 195-202). Springer.

Hamm, M., & Spaaij, R. (2017). Paradigmatic Case Studies and Prison Ethnography: Future Directions in Terrorism Research. In G. LaFree & J. Freilich (Eds.), *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism* (pp. 206-220). Wiley-Blackwell.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. Routledge.

Harris, D. J., Simi, P., & Ligon, G. (2016). Reporting Practices of Journal Articles that Include Interviews with Extremists. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39(7-8), 602-616.

Hemmingsen, A.-S. (2011). Salafi Jihadism: Relying on fieldwork to study unorganized and clandestine phenomena. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34(7), 1201-1215.

Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551-575.

Hoffmann, E. A. (2007). Open-Ended Interviews, Power, and Emotional Labor. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36(3), 318-346.

Horgan, J. (2008). Interviewing terrorists: A case for primary research. In H. Chen, E. Reid, J. Sinai, A. Silke, & B. Ganor (Eds.), *Terrorism informatics: Knowledge management and data mining for homeland security* (pp. 73-99). Springer.

Horgan, J. (2012). Interviewing the terrorists: Reflections on fieldwork and implications for psychological research. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 4(3), 195-211.

Khalil, J. (2019). A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(4), 429-443.

Khelghat-Doost, H. (2019). The Strategic Logic of Women in Jihadi Organizations. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(10), 853-877.

Larsen, J. F. (2020). Talking about radicalization. *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, 21(1), 49-66.

Lee, Raymond, M. (1993). *Doing research on sensitive topics*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Lee, Raymond, M. (1995). *Dangerous Fieldwork*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Kennedy, L. W., & Sherley, A. J. (2006). The Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism Strategies: Campbell Systematic Review Summary. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 2(1), 1-50.

Miled, N. (2019). Muslim researcher researching Muslim youth: Reflexive notes on critical ethnography, positionality and representation. *Ethnography and Education*, 14(1), 1-15.

Miller, J. (2010). The impact of gender when interviewing "offenders on offending." In W. Bernasco (Ed.), *Offenders on offending* (pp. 161–183). Routledge.

Miller-Adams, M., & Myers, C., T. (2003). Breaking into the Bank: The Challenge of Gaining Meaningful Access to the World Bank. In M. Feldman S., J. Bell, & M. T. Berger (Eds.), *Gaining access: A practical and theoretical guide for qualitative researchers* (pp. 86–91). AltaMira Press.

Necef, M. Ü. (2021). Research Note: Former Extremist Interviews Current Extremist: Self-Disclosure and Emotional Engagement in Terrorism Studies. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44(1), 74-92.

Nilsson, M. (2018). Interviewing *Jihadists*: On the Importance of Drinking Tea and Other Methodological Considerations. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 41(6), 419–432.

Noaks, L., & Wincup, E. (2004). *Criminological Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Pawelz, J. (2018). Researching Gangs: How to Reach Hard-to-Reach Populations and Negotiate Tricky Issues in the Field. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 19(1), 1–24.

Pearson, E., & Winterbotham, E. (2017). Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation: A Milieu Approach. *The RUSI Journal*, 162(3), 60–72. Polsky, N. (2007 [1967]). *Hustlers, Beats and Others*. Taylor & Francis Inc.

Sageman, M. (2014). The Stagnation in Terrorism Research. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26(4), 565–580.

Sheikh, J. (2016). "I Just Said It. The State": Examining the Motivations for Danish Foreign Fighting in Syria. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(6), 59–67.

Sikkens, E., van San, M., Sieckelinck, S., & de Winter, M. (2017). *Parental Influence on Radicalization and De-radicalization according to the Lived Experiences of Former Extremists and their Families*. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 12, 192–226.

Silke, A. (2001). The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13(4), 1–14.

Silke, A., & Veldhuis, T. (2017). Countering Violent Extremism in Prisons: A Review of Key Recent Research and Critical Research Gaps. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11(5), 2–11.

Speckhard, A. & Yayla, A. S. (2016): *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. Advances Press, LLC.

Speckhard, A. (2009). Research Challenges Involved in Field Research and Interviews Regarding the Militant Jihad, Extremism, and Suicide Terrorism. *Democracy and Security*, 5(3), 199–222.

Sultana, F. (2007). Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics: Negotiating Fieldwork Dilemmas in International Research. *ACME: An International e-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 6(3), 374–385.

Sumner, J., Sexton, L., & Reiter, K. (2018). The Scream: Insider Access and Outsider Legitimacy in Danish Prisons. In S. K. Rice & M. D. Maltz (Eds.), *Doing Ethnography in Criminology* (pp. 277–288). Springer.

van Maanen, J. (1982). Fieldwork on the beat. In J. van Maanen, J. M. Dabbs, & R. Faulkner R. (Eds.), *Varieties of Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. The University of Chicago Press.

van San, M. (2018). Belgian and Dutch Young Men and Women Who Joined ISIS: Ethnographic Research among the Families They Left Behind. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 41(1), 39–58.

Weggemans, D., Bakker, E., & Grol, P. (2014). *Who Are They and Why Do They Go? Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8(4), 100–110.

West, C., & Zimmerman, Don, H. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, 1(2). Wiktorowicz, Q. (2006). Anatomy of the Salafi Movement. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29(3), 207–239.

Åkerström, M., & Wästerfors, D. (2018). Kvalitative interviews—Praktiske råd og analytiske muligheder [Qualitative Interviews—Practical Guidelines and Analytical Possibilities]. In M. Jacobsen, Hviid (Ed.), *Metoder i kriminologi: Kilder, teknikker og tematikker* [Methods in Criminology: Sources, Techniques and Themes], (pp. 141–171). Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Contributors

Kathrine Elmoose Jørgensen is a PhD student at University of Copenhagen.

Henriette Frees Esholdt holds a PhD from Lund University, where she currently works as a researcher.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Professor Keith Hayward (University of Copenhagen) for constructive and fruitful discussions of our work, as well as Professor Malin Åkerström (Lund University) and Associate Professor Mehmet Ümit Necef (University of Southern Denmark) for feedback on an early draft of this paper. Jørgensen’s research is funded by the Faculty of Law, University of Copenhagen. Esholdt’s research is funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE) (grant number 2016-01119).

Reviews