Going Nativist. How to Interview the Radical Right?

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Abstract

Interviewing different social groups comes with specific challenges. This article focuses on the question of how to interview people who vote or work for the radical right. Over the past decades, radical right-wing movements and parties have become important political forces. Their rise has led to a proliferation of academic publications that have sought to shed light on this renewed swing to the right. In this ever-growing field of research, studies employing qualitative interviews have proven to be of invaluable importance. To date, however, there is no comprehensive, practical guidebook on how to interview the radical right. This article seeks to redress this gap. Drawing on existing studies and personal insights acquired over the course of our own PhD research, during which we interviewed over one hundred radical right respondents ranging from voters and grassroots activists to party elites, this article provides a comprehensive guide for in-depth, interview-based research on the radical right. Specifically, the article discusses a range of practical considerations, including how to find respondents, how to gain access, how to prepare for the interview and how to build rapport during the interview. The insights are useful to early career researchers who rely on qualitative methods when collecting data, as well as scholars from different fields, including political science, public administration and sociology, who are interested in understanding the perspectives and lived realities of the radical right.

Keywords

qualitative research, interviews, rapport building, radical right, grassroots activists, party elites, voters

Introduction

The past decades have witnessed a proliferation of academic studies seeking to shed light on the reasons behind the renewed swing to the right in Europe, the United States and beyond (Mudde, 2019; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In fact, few phenomena in recent political history have received as much scholarly attention as the rise of the so-called ‘radical right’ (Mudde, 2016). While much has been written about radical right voters and politicians, few social scientists have systematically engaged with them, thereby allowing their research subjects to answer questions in their own terms (Damhuis, 2020). More generally, qualitative methods are rarely used in the radical right literature. In fact, the number of quantitative studies relying solely on secondary data has increased sharply in recent decades – particularly among those published in leading political science journals, which is symptomatic of a broader trend in the discipline (Mudde, 2016). These quantitative studies have made many important (and welcome) contributions to the field and enabled us to identify many relevant macro-level factors that structure political behaviour. They are less useful, however, when seeking to understand complex, individual motivations that drive different trends and phenomena. Here, qualitative interviews can offer invaluable insights into the ‘lived worlds of meaning’ as experienced by the radical right (Fisher-Smith et al., 2021, p. 210). Existing qualitative research has engaged with radical right respondents from all ‘levels of political participation’ (Milbrath, 1965), ranging from voters (e.g. Cramer, 2016; Damhuis, 2020) and activists (e.g. Bizeul, 2003; Challier, 2021; Gottraux & Pechu, 2011; Hochschild, 2016), which we will refer to as the ‘grassroots’ level, to administrators and

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office holders (e.g. Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Art, 2011; Cremer, 2021; de Jonge, 2021; Paxton, 2021), which we will refer to as the ‘party-elite’ level. These studies have provided crucial contributions to the radical right literature.

Remarkably, however, little is known about the practicalities of interviewing the radical right (for a rare exception, see Ellinas, 2021). To be sure, scholars have discussed methodological, ethical and practical queries in far right research (e.g. Ashe, 2021). However, these efforts remain fragmented and primarily focus on the extreme right. The ‘far right’ is an umbrella term used to denote both the radical and the extreme right (Mudde, 2019). In this article, we focus on the radical right. While there is no academic consensus on the correct terminology, we use the notion ‘radical right’ to denote movements and parties that are situated on the right end of the political spectrum in the sense that they believe that inequalities (whether they be racial, cultural or economic) are natural and positive (Betz 1994; Bobbio, 1996). Moreover, they are critical of certain features of liberal democracy without necessarily being anti-democratic. The extreme right, by contrast, is revolutionary rather than reformist and rejects the essence of democracy, namely popular sovereignty and majority rule (Mudde, 2019). For the purposes of the present article, this distinction matters for various reasons. For instance, interviewing the extreme right might entail safety concerns and risks of violence that are (far) less acute for those interviewing the radical right.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no comprehensive, practical guide on interviewing the radical right. The present article seeks to redress this gap. We hereby draw on existing studies as well as on personal insights acquired during our own PhD research. Between September 2015 and February 2018, Koen interviewed more than a hundred voters and activists of the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid or PVV) and the French Front National (nowadays known as Rassemblement National) in order to understand how citizens with different social profiles end up voting for the same political party (Damhuis, 2020). Between September 2016 and July 2017, Léonic interviewed eight key representatives of radical right-wing parties in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands to understand why some of these parties fail whereas others succeed (de Jonge, 2021). Despite these different foci, we encountered many common questions, concerns and challenges that occupied us during our research projects. In this article, we integrate the partly overlapping and partly complementary lessons we learned when trying to overcome these challenges. In this way, we are able to show the similarities and particularities of approaching and interviewing radical right respondents from different levels of political participation (i.e. from grassroots to party elites).

Our overarching goal is to provide a comprehensive guide for in-depth, interview-based research on the radical right. Accordingly, this article will not focus so much on ethical dilemmas, but primarily on practical considerations surrounding the question: how to interview the radical right? We systematically tackle this question by discussing different stages of the interview process, including how to find respondents, how to persuade them to participate, how to prepare for the interview and how to build rapport during the interview. The insights provided are useful to early career researchers who rely on qualitative methods when collecting data, as well as scholars from different fields, including political science, public administration and sociology, who are interested in understanding the perspectives and lived realities of the radical right. Prior to discussing practical matters, though, we first reflect on the particular relationship between social scientists and radical right respondents, as it will run like a thread through the remainder of this article.

**Researcher-Respondent Relationship in Radical Right Studies**

One could say that the relationship between (many) social scientists on the one hand and radical right respondents on the other is inversely related to the problem of ‘going native’, a phrase often attributed to the anthropologist Malinowski (1922), who suggested that researchers in a foreign milieu should embrace their role as participants rather than observers in order to grasp the native’s vision of the world. When researchers ‘go native’, then, they easily run the risk of developing strong emotional affinities to their research subjects – an ‘over-rapport’, as Miller (1952) put it – which may corrode their analytical perspective and bias their own perceptions, thus leading them to uncritically accept the views of their respondents as their own (Adler & Adler, 1987; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

When interviewing radical right respondents, the opposite problem tends to arise. That is, instead of too much affinity, social scientists rather experience a lack of proximity. This is due to a reciprocal distance that has a political as well as a sociological dimension. Politically speaking, radical right parties and their voters display a strong and relatively homogeneous dislike for their ‘mainstream’ competitors. At the same time, they are also ‘subject of unique antipathy’ among the voters of other political parties – especially those of social democratic and ‘new left’ parties, such as the Greens (Harteveld, 2021; Harteveld et al., 2021). Precisely these parties are the ones social scientists, just as other ‘socio-cultural professionals’, tend to vote for (Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012). By generally holding pro-EU and culturally liberal views, social scientists tend to be politically opposed to the anti-establishment and anti-immigration stances of radical right-wing representatives and their voters (van de Werfhorst, 2020). This political distance is rooted, in turn, in sociological differences. Whereas social scientists generally operate in the public sector and dispose of more cultural capital than economic capital (simply put, they have more education than money), radical right representatives and voters generally work(ed) in the private sector and have more economic capital than cultural capital (Damhuis, 2020; Flemmen, 2014; Knutsen, 2005; Marsdal, 2013; Tepe, 2012; Vossen, 2013). Besides contrasting political points of view, social scientists and radical right representatives and voters thus...
tend to hold different interests, life-styles and social identities (Bourdieu, 1984; Bornschier et al., 2021; Damhuis, 2020).

Instead of developing an over-rapport, as scholars often do when ‘going native’, researchers studying the radical right are therefore more likely to develop an ‘under-rapport’ with their respondents, as their social positions and political position-takings tend to be diametrically opposed. This challenge is what we refer to here as ‘going nativist’. The term ‘nativist’ is thereby used as a proxy for the radical right, since nativism – that is, an exclusionary form of nationalism (Betz, 2017; Mudde, 2007) – constitutes ‘the ultimate core feature of the ideology of this party family’ (Mudde, 2007, p. 26).

The implications of ‘going nativist’, as we will discuss in detail below, basically cover all the stages of the interview process, ranging from finding respondents to persuading them to participate, and from practical considerations when preparing for the interview to building rapport during the interview. The remainder of this article is structured along these four stages. The conclusion, then, will move beyond practical matters and discuss lessons for future research by reflecting critically on the moral and ethical dilemmas that arise when researching the far right.

How (and Where) to Find Respondents?

Twenty-five years ago, Blondel and Lacroix (1996, p. 169) noted that the first difficulty for researchers aiming at interviewing Front National voters ‘is… to find them’. Despite the mainstreaming of far-right parties and politics over the last decades (e.g. Akkerman et al., 2016; Mondon, 2013), that difficulty still holds today, also beyond the French borders. This is particularly problematic when it comes to finding radical right respondents at the grassroots level. Due to the sociological and political distance outlined above, social scientists are unlikely to cross paths with these voters and activists in their daily (professional) lives. To be sure, this also goes for office holders and party representatives. Yet, party elites are generally easier to locate, since they tend to have (public) email addresses, phone numbers and calendars (as well as secretaries who keep them). Thanks to these official channels, finding respondents proved less difficult for us than some may expect. A first fruitful path towards interviewing the radical right, then, is by simply emailing or calling the party headquarters to ask to be put in contact with a target group or person, or by contacting members of parliament or politicians directly (at the national or subnational level). This approach is obviously most suitable for doing elite interviews.

When trying to locate radical right voters and activists, a second approach may prove more useful. This route involves visiting their spaces, both online and offline. The internet in general and social media platforms in particular have long been popular venues for far right groups to rally support and reach out to like-minded individuals (Caiani & Parenti, 2013). In particular since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, radical right supporters have flocked to online platforms to express their frustrations and encounter like-minded individuals (see, for example, NCTV, 2021). As such, engaging in some precursory digital ethnographic fieldwork is a useful first step to localize potential interviewees. In fact, studying the ‘digital footprint’ of the radical right enables us to unobtrusively gain insight into everyday discussions of radical-right supporters (Klein & Muis, 2019). One way of doing so is by joining or following public groups on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. From there, it is possible to either contact individual users or place advertisements on their pages by inviting volunteers to engage in a conversation as part of a research project.

Of course, focussing on online communication only presents us with a partial picture of radical right supporters. Therefore, it makes sense to also utilize other venues to recruit respondents, for instance by placing advertisements in local newspapers. In fact, newspapers often maintain close contacts with radical right supporters, since they regularly interview voters and activists from across the political spectrum to adequately capture their views. As such, it can be useful to reach out to newspaper editors and journalists, asking them to forward your invitation to their radical right points of contact. Koen did so with a prominent Dutch newspaper, which led to interviews with several radical right Party for Freedom voters.

When following the offline route, it may also be useful to take a look at the party’s public agenda. This approach can provide useful cues about regular meeting places as well as information about official party conferences and campaign activities. To be sure, in some cases, the offline route is notoriously arduous. The PVV in the Netherlands, for instance, only has one official member – its founder and front man Geert Wilders – and no local offices to visit. Moreover, the party stopped organizing events with its volunteers years ago. A solution, then, is to go to meetings, demonstrations or protests where radical right respondents are likely to gather. Researchers will have to judge the feasibility of identifying and attending such gatherings. In the Dutch case, for instance, visiting discussion evenings on the 2016 referendum on the European Union’s association agreement with Ukraine proved to be a fruitful strategy, since many radical right supporters are also ardently Euroseptic (see Pirro et al., 2018).

In most cases, however, finding respondents in local offices or party meetings is relatively straightforward. Koen, for instance, frequently went to the local Front National office in Paris – situated in the rue Jeanne d’Arc (where else?) – where weekly debates were held and dozens of Le Pen voters and activists were attending. Although these grassroots respondents were often eager to participate in interviews, they were not particularly representative of Le Pen’s support-base in the sense that they were generally quite young, came from urban areas and had high levels of education (see Amengay et al., 2017). In fact, voters of radical right parties are generally lower educated compared to the support-bases of other political parties (Ivars Stubager, 2012), and therefore less inclined to participate in politics as well as in social science research, due to well-documented mechanisms of political exclusion (Gaxie, 1978; Bovens & Wille, 2017). One way to remedy such a ‘sampling
imbalance’ is to get involved in activities that bring you into non-hierarchical, preferably durable, contact with potential radical right grassroots respondents. For example, you might consider setting up camp with them at a campaign booth on a local market, or joining them as they distribute flyers in the neighbourhood. Koen once accompanied a group of Front National supporters who were handing out flyers in Paris. While this strategy proved to be an effective way to get in touch with different radical right respondents (thereby ‘increasing the N’), it also created new challenges and ensuing ethical dilemmas. For instance, when engaging in activities intended to propagate the radical right’s agenda, researchers run the risk of amplifying their views (which they may strongly disagree with) or becoming associated with them. Moreover, when participating in radical right activities, respondents might identify you as a political companion rather than as a researcher, which may distort the interview relationship. Therefore, it is crucial to be unambiguous about your role and identity as a researcher.

At the same time, it is important to remember that most radical right supporters are not politically active – only a very small percentage of people actually are (van der Meer, 2017). It can therefore be useful to seek out ‘apolitical’ activities and spaces in order to get a more complete picture of radical right support bases. For instance, Koen went grape picking in Burgundy, where his entire équipe turned out to vote for the Front National. After two weeks of collaborative labour, his co-vintagers invited him to their homes, in southern, western and eastern France, to ‘talk about politics’. This made it possible to enlarge the sample of voters by including citizens living in peripheral areas, who were generally older, lower educated and less interested in politics (i.e. much more representative of Le Pen’s constituency) – and who, moreover, were willing to introduce him to other Le Pen voters with similar characteristics. The more general suggestion here is to visit places where radical right supporters and activists are likely to gather. For instance, studies have shown that these citizens tend to be overrepresented in certain religious communities (e.g. Cremer, 2021), which is why visiting (traditionalist) churches – whether they are Catholic (Mayer, 2002) or Protestant (Rietveld, 2021) – could prove an effective strategy to find grassroots respondents. Moreover, in many countries there are areas and towns where radical right parties obtain disproportionally high scores in elections. Accordingly, one could visit bars or diners in similar radical right strongholds (e.g. Cramer, 2016; Gest, 2016).

When aiming to get in touch with ‘marginal’ or ‘stigmatized’ groups, including radical right-wing voters, activists and representatives, it is often unavoidable to exponentially increase your network of respondents from an ‘original subject zero’ (Gusterson, 2008, p. 98). In fact, this so-called ‘snowball technique’ is frequently used in qualitative studies both on the extreme right (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006) and radical right (Gest, 2016). In our research projects, too, we used this technique to find respondents at the level of party elites and grassroots respondents. Pertaining to the party-elite level, Léonie asked respondents at the end of every interview to identify other relevant interview partners. This often resulted in interviewees pulling out their mobile phones to provide not just names, but also personal phone numbers and email addresses of other key party representatives. One of the main advantages of this technique is that a referral or endorsement by a trusted colleague can provide access to people who might otherwise be reluctant to speak to you; being able to call and say: ‘I received your contact information from your colleague, whom I had a fascinating conversation with yesterday, and who suggested that I talk to you because of your crucial insights on X’ can increase your chances of securing an interview. Similarly, at the grassroots level, Koen asked family members, acquaintances, co-vintagers, friends as well as friends of friends whether they knew any potential radical right supporters that might be interested in participating in his research project. Here too, asking interlocutors at the end of every interview to be brought into contact with politically like-minded people in their social network helped to find new respondents.

**How to Persuade Respondents to Participate?**

If the first problem to interview the radical right is to find relevant respondents, the next challenge is to persuade them to participate in your research project. Indeed, due to political and sociological distances vis-à-vis social scientists, potential interlocutors might be distrustful of the latter and reluctant to respond to their interview requests. In that respect, some radical right parties are notoriously difficult to get a hold of. The Dutch PVV, which only rarely cooperates with researchers (and journalists), is a case in point (de Lange & Art, 2011; Vossen, 2013). Similarly, not all radical right respondents at the grassroots level are equally eager to accept an interview request. Besides more general reasons to decline an invitation (as interviews can be time-consuming as well as emotionally and intellectually demanding; see Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004), we encountered justifications that are specifically related to the radical right, notably the potentially negative repercussions of being tainted by the stigma of extremism. For instance, Tom van Grieken, leader of the Flemish Interest Party (Vlaams Belang), explained to Léonie that people who vote for his party still run the risk of losing their jobs for publicly supporting the party. By the same token, a respondent Koen met only accepted to be interviewed on condition that the interview would not be recorded, out of fear of being publicly recognized as a voter of the Dutch radical right PVV – especially by his colleagues. In light of these difficulties, what strategies work to persuade radical right respondents to participate in your research project?

Whether written or orally stated, the first key to gaining access is to prepare a strong introductory letter or statement that describes your project in a way that is likely to be palatable to the interviewee. The choice of words here is crucial; it should be simple (avoid jargon) and non-offensive (avoid potentially stigmatizing labels, such as ‘extreme right’ and
strategically used the term ‘First, you might choose a descriptive term that is likely to carry a positive connotation for respondents. For instance, Koen strategically used the term ‘Euroscptic right-wing parties’, which many radical right supporters are likely to voluntarily identify with. Second, you might consider packaging potentially offensive terms in order to ‘defuse’ them, thereby implicitly distancing yourself from the usual negative characterizations of such parties – and accordingly from those using these terms (i.e. supposedly ‘left-wing’ academics and journalists). To this end, Léonie effectively used the following phrasing: ‘I am conducting research on so-called “right-wing populist parties”. Your party is often described as such. Since I am conducting research on you and your party, I would really like to talk to you rather than just write about you. Would you be willing to meet?’ Of course, this opens up questions about the positionality of the researcher as well as related ethical considerations (see Blee, 1993; Mondon & Winter, 2021). While this article focuses primarily on the practicalities of interviewing the radical right, we briefly return to these questions in the conclusion.

The second key to gaining access is to be persistent; sending a follow-up email or making a phone call is sometimes necessary (without nagging, of course). In case of a negative response, it is worth trying to gauge whether the response is due to particular (time-)constraints or more generic in nature. In the case of the former, it can help to ‘play the long game’ by making clear that you are involved in an ongoing project, which means that you can make yourself available at any time that is convenient for them, even if that means postponing for a year or two. As Delaney (2007, p. 213) has rightly pointed out, ‘[i]t is very hard for someone to reply that they are busy for the next 2 years’. This is equally true for party elites and grassroots respondents. In the case of a more generic rejection, as we both experienced with the Dutch PVV (‘We receive many similar requests on a weekly basis. Unfortunately, we have a limited capacity, we are therefore unable to comply with all these requests’), we suggest moving down the ‘ladder of party hierarchy’ by contacting less prominent party figures or by switching from the national to the subnational level. For instance, contacting the PVV chairmen in the Provincial States of Drenthe, Groningen, Limburg, Overijssel and Utrecht proved effective, as several of them responded and brought Koen in contact with volunteers, which subsequently led to the formation of a sizeable number of respondents across the country. Moreover, it can be useful to seek out so-called ‘auxiliary organizations’, including youth wings, scientific bureaus as well as youth foundations.

Importantly, persuading radical right respondents to participate in your research project is not only a matter of presenting your project in a palatable way and reaching out persistently; your own background also plays a role. A third key to gaining access, then, pertains to self-presentation. Here, we both found that being a PhD-student was a definite asset. After all, as Jonathan White (2011, p. 230) already remarked, the image of the student comes with ‘connotations of someone reliant on a favor, perhaps a little naive in the ways of the world and in need of having things explained’. Moreover, students have not yet (fully) entered professional life. Accordingly, their societal status is relatively ‘innocent’ compared to other social groups, such as artists, social workers or human rights lawyers, who might be perceived negatively by potential radical right respondents. In view of these advantages, we both emphasized our background as students when contacting potential respondents.

Being higher up in the academic hierarchy (for instance when you are a seasoned academic or a full professor) can make it more difficult to approach grassroots interlocutors, because you can no longer play the ‘innocent’ card. In this case, it may be wise to downplay your academic track record by dropping the titles and introducing yourself as a researcher using your first name only. By contrast, when approaching party elites, strategically mentioning academic affiliations and institutional affiliations can be an asset when trying to open up channels of communication. In brief, the key to gaining access is to try and ‘level the playing field’ by presenting yourself in a way that draws the interest of your interlocutors without coming across as intimidating or threatening. Of course, there are some factors that can make it particularly challenging to gain access to radical right respondents (e.g. gender, race or ethnicity), which cannot simply be ‘masked’ or ‘downplayed’. Yet, as shown below, these factors do not necessarily make it impossible to conduct interviews with the radical right. We come back to this in our discussion on rapport-building. Prior to doing so, however, we turn to discuss a range of practical matters when preparing for the interview.

How to Prepare for the Interview?
As with any fieldwork preparation, it is crucial to consider potential risks, to know when to retreat, to prioritize personal safety and well-being and to do mitigation planning. This may be particularly pertinent for women and researchers of colour who study the extreme right (see Ramalingam, 2021). By taking this into consideration, the following paragraphs focus on practical matters that require careful consideration when preparing to interview radical right respondents.

A first practical consideration relates to the meeting location. In our experience, this was not much of an issue when it came to elite interviews. In most cases, Léonie was invited to visit radical right respondents at the party headquarters. For elites, being interviewed in the premises of their offices is often a typical part of their working routine. More generally, granting the interviewee the benefit of having the ‘home court advantage’ can give them the sense that they are in control of the interview process. Indeed, as Gamson (1990) observed, meeting at their place puts the interaction between interviewer and interviewees on a more equal footing, which constitutes an
important advantage as it can help reduce the sociological
distance between social scientists and radical right respond-
ents outlined above. Moreover, meeting at their own turf
rather than having your interlocutors come to an external
meeting location is conducive to moving beyond ‘the public
performance element’ that interviewees are likely to stage in
the public eye (Ramalingam, 2021, p. 265). After all, in the
private and anonymous setting of their own kitchen or living
room, people tend to be less reluctant to talk about their
personal experiences and political preferences than in a public
place, such as a bar or a restaurant. This can help to overcome
the potentially suppressing effects of the antipathetic stigma
that radical right-wing parties tend to carry in most western
societies. Indeed, in the words of Jeffrey Kaplan (2016, p. 3),
in the home of far-right respondents, the ‘aura of demonization
[...] fades away’. This is why we preferred to arrange inter-
views with grassroots respondents in their own homes. One
additional advantage when visiting the residences of re-
pondents is that it can provide relevant nonverbal information
(such as books on the shelf or an absence thereof, paintings,
posters and photos on the wall, etc.), which can help uncover
truths about their past. At the same time, it is important to be
flexible and leave the final choice of the meeting location to
the respondent, who, after all, may not always feel at ease to
talk politics at home, for instance due to her or his housemates.
In these cases, meeting in a public place where nobody is
within earshot may be more advantageous.

Once you have decided upon a suitable meeting location, a
second practical consideration is what to wear when going
there. After all, our clothes are a social phenomenon par ex-
cellence (Aspers & Godard, 2013) as they can carry all sorts
of symbolic meanings, ranging from vulgar to refined, from
sober to extravagant, and from chic to sporty (Bourdieu,
1984). Since radical right respondents tend to have differ-
ent profiles and life-styles than social scientists, we suggest
selecting clothes that are as ‘neutral’ as possible. Accordingly,
Koen systematically wore the same type of jeans, sneakers, a
white shirt and a sweater, which had the quality of being
neither too official nor too casual. When interviewing party
elites, it may be more appropriate to choose something slightly
more formal to fit the occasion. For instance, when visiting a
party official inside a parliament building, you are likely to
stick out if you opt for jeans and sneakers; accordingly, Léonie
chose to wear dark shoes and black jeans with a unicoloured
shirt. In any case, in line with established qualitative interview
practices, the chosen outfit should be nondescript so as to
avoid evoking cultural distaste among interlocutors, thereby
enabling you to meet and adapt to a group of respondents as
wide as possible (see Cramer, 2016).

A third practicality concerns obtaining informed consent.
Respondents on the far right are likely to display feelings of
suspicion or unease when confronted with standard (often
highly formal) academic approaches of securing informed
consent. This is especially the case for grassroots respondents.
In his ethnographic study of the British National Party (BNP),
for instance, Ashe (2021, p. 296) found that interviewees were
often ‘visibly intimidated by the idea of signing a form which
appeared to them as being a formal written contract’. He
therefore chose to put away the information sheet and consent
form by negotiating consent verbally. In most cases, we also
opted to inform interlocutors verbally and ask for permission
to use their insights in our research. We found that this strategy
tended to put our interlocutors at ease, which is essential for a
productive interview. Elites are more likely to be acquainted
with official documents; yet, in some occasions, it may be
more effective to refrain from obtaining written consent by
instead negotiating consent verbally. For instance, Léonie
informed her respondents about the research project and data
management via email, but consciously chose not to ask her
interviewees to sign written consent forms since this was
likely to over-formalize the process, which may have alienated
participants.2 In any case, it is crucial to consider matters
pertaining to consent and data management prior to con-
ducting the interview. Most (if not all) universities now have
ethics boards who can provide guidelines, templates and
advice on the legal and practical ramifications of carrying out
human subject research. We therefore suggest following your
institutional guidelines before you start contacting potential
interviewees.

With these practical matters out of the way, we now turn to
the arguably most challenging part of conducting interviews
with radical right respondents, namely: how to build rapport?

How to Build Rapport during the Interview?

Every cookbook on in-depth interviewing will tell you that
establishing a relationship with your respondents is a pre-
requisite for a successful interview. However, due to the
sociological and political distances outlined above, re-
searchers in the field of far right studies often see themselves
confronted with a concern that Klandermans and Mayer
(2006, p. 63) raised based on their interviews with extreme
right activists: ‘How does one establish a relationship with
people to whom one doesn’t feel akin?’ When it comes to
interviewing the radical right, this concern involves walking a
double ‘tightrope’ (Blee, 2002). On the one hand, how do you
present yourself socially to gain trust, even though your re-
pondents might (initially) be distrustful of people like
yourself? On the other hand, how do you develop enough
rapport so that your respondents share their story, even though
you may profoundly disagree with their political points of
view?

When it comes to the first ‘tightrope’, it is undeniable that
some factors can facilitate reducing social distance and
building trust, while others can complicate it. In this regard,
we both found that being first-generation students who grew
up in rural areas made us more approachable during our
fieldwork. For instance, by hinting at his familial background
and rural roots during the interviews, thereby speaking slightly
with a regional accent (which provided evidence of his
provincial origins as well as an implicit message: I am not an elitist), Koen was able to limit the social distance between many grassroots respondents and himself. At the same time, when interviewing higher-educated radical right respondents, who are overrepresented among the party elites but can also be found among grassroots interlocutors, having an academic background turned out to be an asset. For instance, some of the radical right respondents we interviewed referred to Nietzsche, Robespierre, Theodore Dalrymple or the Maslow pyramid as if they were obvious conversation topics. Knowledge on these matters thus turned out to be a prerequisite for coming up with relevant follow-up questions and maintaining credibility as a social scientist. In sum, radical right respondents have different profiles, especially at the grassroots level (Damhuis, 2020; Gottraux & Péchu, 2011), so the more diverse your own background and the more multifarious your stock of autobiographical material that can be mobilized during the interview, the easier it will be to relate to your respondents (Marchand-Lagier, 2009).

Of course, some characteristics such as gender, race and ethnicity are less ‘malleable’, which can pose additional challenges to female researchers and researchers of colour. As white researchers, we cannot provide any practical insights on building rapport for researchers of colour (see Ramalingam 2021), but we can offer some reflections on our experiences with gender-dynamics. In that light, Léonie found that being a woman did not pose any additional hurdles to conducting fieldwork. While it may have resulted in being taken less seriously, it also enabled her to easily assume the role of a ‘status subordinate’, thereby giving the interviewee the feeling that they are in control of the interview. As Delaney (2007, p. 215) observed, ‘being a “status subordinate” can be turned to an advantage in that it allows you to say in a very non-threatening way: “I don’t really understand that, can you explain...”’ Indeed, as Kathleen Blee (2002) has observed, being a woman in a male-dominated context (including most radical right milieux) is not necessarily a disadvantage since female researchers are likely to be perceived as less-threatening (see also Hochschild, 2016; Grippa, 2019). The bottom line here is that in order to get your respondents to open up to you, you need to first ‘break the ice’ by finding some ‘conversational common ground’ (Blee 2002, p. 12), let them talk, and, of course, genuinely listen to what they have to say.

In order to break the ice and find common ground, it is useful to hone in on statements (however mundane they may seem) that can inspire a sense of commonality, such as memories of growing up in a particular region or neighbourhood, or details about a favourite food or sport. The interview method you choose can be beneficial here. We both used in-depth semi-structured interviews (rather than standardized, structured interviews), since they provided the conversational flexibility that was needed for building rapport. There are, of course, different types of in-depth interview methods, including oral-history and life-history interviews. While the latter tends to be time-consuming and therefore less suitable for elite-interviews, it proved particularly helpful for interviewing grassroots respondents. Koen employed this method to better understand different trajectories leading toward electoral support for the radical right. While letting his respondents talk about their past, this use of life-history interviews enabled him to cover a broad range of conversational topics, thereby easing respondents to open up to him (compare Klandermans & Mayer, 2006). Importantly, the order of introducing these topics mattered. For instance, when interviewing respondents who left school relatively early in life, talking about ‘familiar’ issues, including neighbourhood experiences or the place they (and you) grew up in was key to building rapport, thereby paving the way for discussing explicitly political questions. In other situations, by contrast, notably when talking to politically interested citizens, it was necessary to first discuss present-day politics before moving to more personal topics.

Talking about political issues can be challenging because you might profoundly disagree with the views your respondents express. This brings us to our second ‘tightrope’, that is, the political distance that exists between (most) social scientists and radical right respondents. For many social scientists, walking this tightrope boils down to the question of how to ‘sympathize with the unsympathetic’ (Ramalingam, 2021, p. 259). There is no easy answer to this question, and we both struggled with the issue during our fieldwork. For instance, Léonie found herself nodding to some blatantly sexist and xenophobic statements being made by an interviewee to signal that she understood what was being said and encourage the interlocutor to continue opening up to her, but later realized (with some horror) that this could have signalled that she agreed with the statements being made. Similarly, Koen was exposed to racist jokes during a family dinner with French Front National voters, where he found himself torn between wanting to speak up and the desire to gain more insights from his interlocutors. Accordingly, while drawing on his status as a non-native speaker, he acted as if he did not fully understand the situation and quickly directed the conversation to a different topic.

To be sure, not all researchers have the luxury of a similar non-native escape route. Yet, there are broader strategies that can help you walk this tightrope. First, when being directly confronted, it is good to be prepared for sharing your own political views. One practical suggestion is to relegate your response to the end of the interview, for instance by saying, ‘I’m happy to talk about my views, but for the sake of this interview, let’s first focus on yours’. In any case, it is important to steer clear from any potentially offensive, stigmatizing labels, which we discussed earlier.

Second, it is useful to compartmentalize by separating your role as a researcher from other roles (Dobratz & Waldner, 2021). In line with this coping strategy, Léonie found it helpful to remind herself that she was not interviewing her respondents as a journalist or a lawyer, whose role it (arguably) is to
challenge or cross-examine their subjects. Instead, as a researcher, she was primarily interested in understanding why her interviewees felt or acted a certain way (see also Sterkenburg 2021). In that light, it can help to remind yourself of the shared humanity that binds you and your interview partners together (Kaplan, 2016).

Third, we found it useful to analytically differentiate between empathy and sympathy (Ramalingam, 2021), which can also help in dealing with any emotional implications of interviewing radical right respondents (Bellè, 2016; Nikolski, 2011). While sympathy involves conjuring up compassionate appreciation, empathy implies placing yourself ‘in the shoes’ of your interlocutors. Where showing sympathy for worldviews you fundamentally disagree with may be impossible, developing empathy for your interviewees allows you to gain insights into their worldviews without subscribing to them, thereby enabling you to get an ‘inside’ view whilst maintaining your ‘outsider’ status. In the words of Martyn Hammersley (2006, p. 11), ‘understanding people does not require sharing their beliefs, or being obliged to offer them support; if it did, this would considerably reduce the range of people that could be studied’. Differently put, interviewing radical right respondents often implies what Hochschild (2016, p. 5) described as climbing an ‘empathy wall’. That is, ‘an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances’. Seen from this point of view, using empathic ‘back-channel communication’ (Yngve, 1970), consisting of head-nods, smiles, and short messages such as ‘okay’, ‘I see’, ‘really?’ and ‘uh-huh’, becomes an effective tool to build rapport rather than a means to display agreement. To sum up, while building rapport with the radical right will often entail walking a double tightrope, our experiences show that there are multiple strategies to deal with this challenge.

Conclusion

Qualitative research in general and in-depth interviews in particular have long formed a cornerstone of social science research. While most publications in the field of radical right research remain quantitative in nature, recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in qualitative studies relying on interview data (e.g. Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; Paxton, 2021). These studies have made important contributions to our understanding of the support for and success of radical right-wing parties. However, interviewing people who vote or work for the radical right comes with specific challenges. These challenges are not commonly discussed in the existing literature. This article set out to address this lacuna. Drawing on insights obtained during our PhD trajectories, we have offered a range of practical guidelines and strategies to help researchers in their efforts to find radical right respondents, gain access, prepare for the interview and build rapport during the interview.

Besides these practical challenges, interviewing radical right respondents also gives rise to a range of ethical concerns. While these concerns go beyond the scope of the present article, this text would be incomplete without at least briefly reflecting on the moral and ethical dilemmas that arise when researching the far right. These dilemmas ultimately boil down to the fact that our scholarly obligation to ‘do no harm’ to our research subjects (e.g. by ‘demoralizing’ them) conflicts with the moral imperative to distance ourselves from the xenophobic and racist views propagated by certain far right parties and politicians (Mondon & Winter, 2021). Some scholars therefore consciously choose not to conduct fieldwork with far right respondents in the first place ‘for the sake of moral hygiene’ (Gingrich & Banks, 2006, p. 7; see also Springwood & King, 2001). Others have warned that by granting (disproportionate) attention to the far right, researchers risk giving them a platform through which they can express their views, which can ultimately contribute to the normalization of far right ideas (Mondon & Winter, 2021).

While we are acutely aware of these concerns, we believe that qualitative research in general and in-depth interviews in particular can help us analyse and rather than amplify far right views. Indeed, we found that our interviews enabled us to gain an in-depth understanding of the radical right, notably by allowing radical right respondents to express their views in their own terms. In this process, we observed that most of our interlocutors turned out to be (much) more ‘humane’ than their public image might predict (e.g. Harteveld, 2021; Harteveld et al., 2021). The grassroots respondents in particular were mostly just ‘ordinary’ citizens, who frequently expressed their gratitude for being listened to in a genuine way. As such, we concur with Busher, (2021, p. 281) that in a time of increasing societal and political polarization, ‘research that grapples with the nuance, complexity and basic humanity of the “repugnant cultural other”’ is more important than ever. We therefore would like to encourage other researchers to consider interviewing the radical right. Before doing so, however, it remains crucial to critically reflect upon one’s own positionality, the broader societal implications of one’s research project as well as the practical issues that arise when ‘going nativist’. We hope that this article can serve as a useful starting point to deal with these issues.

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Notes

1. Interview with Tom Van Grieken on 13 July 2017 in Brussels.
2. Similarly, it may be preferential to record data by hand, as the presence of a voice recorder can consciously or subconsciously influence interlocutors’ candidness (Gest, 2016).

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