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Review 1 of “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”

Sébastien Tutenges

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Vote: Publish pending minor changes

[For votes to count, referees must reasonably explain why they voted as they did. Thus, please explain your vote. If you voted to publish pending minor changes, specify each change, why it is needed, and, possibly, how it should/could be done.]

This is a fascinating paper on the challenges of accessing extremist milieus. It is rare with this kind of honest behind-the-scenes discussion of the practical and emotional obstacles in ethnographic research, especially in papers that go into scientific journals. I therefore consider it a welcome contribution that may help other researchers in the process of doing ethnography. However, I have some suggestions for details to consider, change, or omit before publication.

- An overall advice is to simplify sentences and sharpen the arguments. For example, the title is unusually long—perhaps omit “An ethnographic account of...” from the subtitle.
- It is not clear what “takfir” means. This term appears in the Abstract and afterwards. Abstracts should be short and crystal clear, so consider omitting this term from the Abstract— and explain it better further down in the text.
- The Introduction is long. Consider omitting parts of it, including this sentence: “Thus, it does not take much imagination to realize that the researcher’s gendered and religious position may entail possibilities as well as obstacles in the process of gaining access to the milieu.” Also, the entire paragraph that begins with “According to Berger (2015), the researcher’s positionality...” could probably be omitted or condensed. The paragraph reads a bit like parts of an Introductory book on methods and I am not sure that we need this. Also, the paragraph contains a bit of redundancy e.g. on what positionality means.
- The literature review could benefit from more information, context, and points. For example, where did Badurdeen, Greenwood, etc. do their research? Larsen (2020) did not get much of an access, but why is that - and what other insights can be derived from Larsen’s study?
- Is the review about studies on Islamist radicalization AND studies on terrorism? If it is both of these fields, more works needs to be included in the review. Maybe just make clear that you only/mainly focus on research on Islamist radicalization.
- Great insights are drawn from works that do not deal with extremism (Goffman, some of Bucerius’ work etc.). Wise to mention these works in the top of the review. This gives the article a broader appeal, which is important. More on this below.
- Methodology section: I would make it clearer that we are dealing with two separate research projects. Sentences like this one makes it sound as if you did the data collection together: “We usually approached people by calling them...”

- Analysis section: I am not sure if "Analysis" is the right word for this part of the article. "Findings" / "Results" perhaps?
- The authors seem to have declined collecting extra data in one or several situations, but it was not entirely clear to me why. After all, was it a good idea to "discontinue the access process" (e.g. page 10 & 14), when data are so difficult to obtain? I sit with a feeling that perhaps it was a bad idea, given that building trust sometimes takes a very long time. Of course, ethnographers should not run serious personal risks, but people who merely make us feel uncomfortable or vulnerable may be or turn into valuable sources of information in the long run. This could perhaps be more self-critically discussed? Being self-critical can help others who will do similar fieldwork in the future. Alternatively, convince us that it was indeed a good idea to disrupt this contact.
- I really liked the parts of the "Analysis" that make reference to the researcher's own emotions, and I would like to see more of this. We researchers can make use of our own emotions as sources of data. If we feel uncomfortable in a situation, why might that be? If we feel disgusted by a person, why so? There are important insights to gain from such self-scrutiny. This can be done without being overly touchy-feely about it. Moreover, the use of emotions is part of the process of gaining access. We mobilize certain emotions and disguise others in order to gain trust, access, and good data. Furthermore, we can elicit certain emotional insights from the people we interact with by way of emotional display. For example, my guess is that "Sonja" became emotional in the way she did because the researcher opened up to this kind of emotionality (page 15-16). All ethnographers do this (both woman and men), but it is rarely mentioned in the research literature. More reflections on the authors' own emotions and use of emotions could be helpful for other researchers, also outside the relatively small field of Islamist radicalization research. This would make the paper appealing to a much broader readership of qualitative researchers and students of qualitative criminology.

I know that this was a lot of suggestions, but please note that they are all minor ones that hopefully can help make the paper better than it already is.