

## **Taking Sides with Swedish Protesters: Gaining and Maintaining Trust in the Field**

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### **Abstract**

Researching protests and activism can contain various challenges, even more so when then the researcher embeds themselves in the protest context. Based on an ethnographic study of an environmental campaign in Sweden we will in this chapter discuss the challenges and risks the first author faced when collecting longitudinal interview and observational data. More specifically, we discuss challenges and risks related to; gaining access to a protest setting, gaining access to people, gaining access to stories, maintaining access and trust, and becoming vulnerable and at risk in the field. In particular we discuss advantages, and risks, of the researcher taking sides and positioning themselves on one side of the conflict. We argue that, in the study of the Swedish environmental campaign, taking sides made us better positioned to give a more accurate account of the campaign and campaign participants through understanding the context and phenomena. We will also suggest that taking sides and becoming part of the group – sharing identity – can in some studies increase the researcher's safety while in the field. We highlight the need for continuous negotiations and consideration while in the field to ensure both the participants' and researcher's safety and privacy.

**Keywords:** Ethnography, participant observation, activism, collective action, protest

In mid-July 2012, the quarry company NordKalk received approval to begin preparations for a limestone quarry in Ojnare forest on one of Sweden's largest islands, Gotland. The quarry was to be located bordering the lake Bästeträsk, which is part of a protected Natura 2000<sup>1</sup> area (Natura 2000: European Environmental Agency, 2015). Bästeträsk functions as the water reserve for the entire island and had, since 2009, provided residents in the area with drinking water. The planned quarry would cut through large parts of the water inflow to Bästeträsk (Fältbiologerna, 2013) and risk removing this water source. Furthermore, the forest, thought to be home to about 250 red-listed species, was judged to become irreversibly damaged by the quarrying of limestone in the area (The Swedish Environmental Agency, 2016). Locals had, unsuccessfully, been fighting the quarry application for seven years to protect their water and the unique environment, both in court and through small meetings and rallies.

In response to the approval to start preparing for the quarry, a group of about 15 pro-environmental youth activists set up camp in the forest. The activists spent their days in the forest deliberately blocking the deforestation machines. In the initial phase of the forest occupation, most of the locals did not participate in the occupation or protest in the forest. In interviews after the occupation, the locals explained this through, initially, not wanting to be seen with the activists. The planned quarry had divided the community into two sides, one side opposing the quarry due to the water and environmental issues, and one side supporting the quarry as it promised jobs in the area for years ahead. Some of the locals opposing the quarry expressed that they were worried that the activists would use tactics that were not in line with the locals' norms of behavior. There was a worry that through supporting the activists they would be seen as radical, and this could affect their relationships within the

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<sup>1</sup> Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas for valuable and threatened species and habitats across Europe (European Environmental Agency, 2015)

community. For example, one schoolteacher was worried about how they would be viewed by the head-teacher and the students' parents.

It was not until a large police presence was ordered and over 70 police officers arrived and started evicting the activists from the forest that the locals and activists came together. During the most intense period, a week in late August, the campaigners, who were now in numbers of 250, sat in front of the deforestation machines, climbed high up in trees, and resided in the restricted areas where the deforestation was to take place. The police evicted them by physically removing them back to the camp or to the outskirts of the forest. In some cases, the police even drove the campaigners several kilometers away and dropped them off in 'nowhere-land' or detained them in vans or a nearby hostel for several hours. This pattern continued for about a week, until the sub-contractor, contracted to do the deforestation work, withdrew their involvement. It was directly after the intense week of clashes with the police that the first author began her involvement in the campaign. Even though the most intense period of the campaign was over, some campaigners remained in the forest camp, and actions and events were held all over Sweden to keep the campaign alive in the years to come. In September 2018, the final court decision regarding the forest was ruled in favor of the forest, and the forest is now protected from future interference such as deforestation and quarrying as a direct result of the protesters' work both on the ground and in court.

To understand participation in activism and protests we need to understand how protest participants understand themselves, their world and their choices in the world. To do so, we undertook an ethnographic approach to exploring enduring psychological changes (see Vestergren, Drury, & Hammar Chiriatic, 2018; 2019) amongst the campaigners in the environmental campaign in Sweden. To access participants' accounts of how (or whether) they had changed through their participation in the campaign, we utilized a longitudinal ethnographic design consisting of interviews and participant observation over an 18-month

period. The first author interviewed 14 activists and 14 locals involved in the environmental campaign once a month for 6 months and once again after an additional 12 months. The study was introduced to the participants as a study focused on experiences of participation in collective action. The participants were informed that they would be asked about their lives previous to the campaign, during the campaign, and future intentions. All participants were approached opportunistically during the first author's visits to the campaign, and only one person declined participation. At the start of the first interview all participants signed an informed consent form detailing the researcher's responsibilities and the participants' rights, such as right to anonymity and right to withdraw participation at any time during the data collection. The invitation to the study, as well as all interviews, was made when the first author was alone with the participant to avoid other people (both within and outside of the campaign) knowing who the participants were. The interviews were conducted in the forest or in participants' homes. Throughout the duration of the study the first author made several trips to the island ranging from a couple of days to a week.

The ethnographic approach in this type of research context can facilitate both recruiting and retaining participants. By embedding yourself in the protest context there is a greater opportunity for relationship building and building of trust between researcher and participants, hence facilitating data collection. Furthermore, the approach can enable a deepening of the researchers' understanding of the events and phenomena.

Embedding yourself in groups over extended periods of time can also entail various challenges. This can be even more demanding when the group/s are in a conflictual context (e.g., Campbell, 2017; Höglund & Öberg, 2011). However, to go beyond understanding of what people say they think and do and gain insights in the everyday life of activists and protesters, knowledge of the context and building relationships is essential (e.g., Hammersley, 2006; Whyte, 1993).

In this chapter we discuss the challenges and risks the first author faced when embedding herself in an environmental direct action campaign, the Ojnare campaign, in Sweden. In particular we discuss the advantages, and risks, of the researcher taking sides and positioning themselves on one side of the conflict. We suggest that by taking sides, in this study, we were better positioned to give a more accurate account through understanding the phenomena. Furthermore, we will argue that taking sides and becoming part of the group - sharing identity - can in some studies increase the researcher's safety in the field. Throughout the chapter we highlight the need for continuous delicate negotiations and considerations while in the field.

The chapter is organized in five parts: (1) gaining access to a protest setting, (2) gaining access to people, (3) gaining access to stories, (4) maintaining access and trust, and (5) becoming vulnerable and at risk in the field. The first three parts relate to challenges we faced while accessing and collecting data in the field. First, we discuss challenges in *gaining access to a protest setting*, such as the 'unexpected nature' of protests and participants' initial lack of trust in outsiders. We then move on to challenges in *gaining access to people* in protest settings. More specifically, we discuss the importance of transparency, how we negotiated the lack of trust, and the facilitating element of shared values between the researcher and participants. The third part focuses on how the first author through building mutual trust *gained access to stories*. However, this also entailed challenges regarding participant anonymity. The fourth part, *maintaining access and trust*, discusses challenges for a longitudinal study design and how we negotiated the first author's presence in the research context over time. This includes discussions about the researcher's extended participation and negotiation between being a researcher and a member of the group. Furthermore, we highlight how, in some studies, there is a need to avoid contact with outgroups, such as the police. This part is concluded by highlighting the importance of giving back to the

participants. In the final part we discuss *becoming vulnerable and at risk in the field*. In addition to discussing the risks the first author faced, we attempt to provide some suggestions on what to consider before and during embedding yourself in protest contexts. In particular we address the risk of threats/violence from outgroups and how the ingroup can function as a safeguard against these, but also make the researcher vulnerable within the group through power relations and loss of trust. Before moving on to discussing the challenges and risks we will give a brief outline of the Swedish protest context.

### **Sweden: Is it a Peaceful Protest Context?**

Sweden is in the top five countries in terms of equality (World Economic Forum, 2018), and might be considered as an open, fair and free nation. In comparison to most other countries, activism related to the state is regarded as much easier in Sweden (and broader Scandinavia) and with fewer negative consequences for activists (e.g., Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2018, for comparisons). The protest tradition in Sweden is not as prominent as in other countries. Historically, demonstrations other than on 1<sup>st</sup> May were rare until late 1960s (Jämte & Sörblom, 2016). Furthermore, protests in Sweden rarely end in violence. However, there are protests that have ended in violence. In 2001 Gothenburg faced three days of rioting during the EU summit. During these riots, several protesters and police were injured and a protester was shot by a police officer (BBC news, 2001; Mueller, 2004). The Gothenburg riots led to the development of the Swedish dialogue police<sup>2</sup>. In 2013, a peaceful anti-racism march in Kärrtorp (e.g., Bankel, 2013) was attacked by neo-Nazis, which resulted in violent clashes between anti-racist protesters, neo-Nazis and police. Even though there is little evidence of threats and violence towards individual activists in Sweden there are some accounts of such experiences (e.g., Green, 2018; Korsell et al., 2009). In

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<sup>2</sup> The dialogue unit was developed to function as a link between groups or people arranging protest marches/rallies and the police (Dialogpolisen, 2016). The dialogue police work based on four conflict-reducing principles: knowledge, facilitation, communication, and differentiation (e.g., Reicher et al., 2007).

interviews conducted in 2019 for a review of hate and threats against independent opinion-makers in Sweden, activists and independent opinion-makers expressed being exposed to death threats and threats of violence from other groups and individuals of the public (Civil Rights Defenders, unpublished report). Some of the activists reported how they, due to their engagement in campaigns, had experienced loss of jobs and been discriminated against in job interviews. However, there were no direct repressive measures from the government or related agencies reported by the activists in relation to their involvement in campaigns.

Activism is not always something people want to be identified with, as demonstrated above by the locals in the environmental campaign not wanting to be seen as activists. This could be partly due to the norm-normative opinions and methods used by some activist groups (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2011) and portrayal of activists in mainstream media (Vestergren, 2010). In media portrayals of activists there is often an exclusion of the political relevance of activism (Persson, 2016). Activists are often described as ‘dreamers’ (Persson, 2016) and actions often described in terms of war and violence along with descriptions of activist groups as disorganized and irrational (Vestergren, 2010).

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention and the Swedish Security Service suggested in a joint report (Korsell et al., 2009) that the Swedish media should adopt a more nuanced stance in reports of activism, especially regarding more extreme groups, as a step toward decreasing violence towards and from these groups. There is also reluctance from activist groups to be identified with other activist groups even though they share the same core values and fight the same struggle. For example, some animal rights groups, such as Animal Rights Sweden, do not want to be associated with other non-legal groups, such as Animal Liberation Front, who use more non-normative methods (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2011).

## **1. Gaining Access to a Protest Setting**

Accessing protest settings, for research purposes, is not without difficulty (Johl & Renganathan, 2010). Firstly, you need to find them. Collective actions are often of an ‘unexpected’ and dynamic nature (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000). In the case of the Ojnare campaign, the forest camp came to be of great use. Without having any prior contact with the campaigners, the first author went to visit the campaigners in the forest camp to recruit participants for the study. Other campaigns may lack a physical place for gathering, which of course can make the initial contact more difficult.

Secondly, you need to be let in to access the protest setting. The ‘unexpected’ nature of collective actions (Drury & Reicher, 2000) could, along with a good opportunity for protest arising, have its foundation in a lack of trust. The lack of trust can be of great concern for researchers, as it may result in a very time-consuming process of gaining access (e.g., Ronald, 2011). It is not uncommon that activists are suspicious of outsiders (Blee, 2003; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Jipson & Litton, 2000; Sanders-McDonagh, 2014; Spalek & O’Rawe, 2014) – sometimes with good reason. For example, there was an extensive undercover police action within the UK activist community between 1987 and 2010 where police presenting as activists formed relationships with campaigners and lived within the community for years, pretending to be activists while gathering intelligence for the police (Evans & Lewis, 2012). Such covert actions by police, or researchers not disclosing their identity and aims, adds to the challenge of gaining access to participants in protest contexts (Cassell, 1982). Hence, being transparent in your role and avoiding covert methods when embedding yourself in protest contexts may increase the chances of gaining and maintaining that access.

Furthermore, some campaigns and actions require information to be kept within the group to avoid details, of for example events, leaking to third parties such as the police (Hirsch, 1990). This need for secrecy was at times apparent in the environmental campaign



throughout the first author's time there, especially when it came to actions that were of a more non-normative nature such as campaigners chaining themselves to deforestation machines. These non-normative actions were usually only known by a few of the campaigners to avoid interruption by the police, hence there was a limitation in information sharing.

## **2. Gaining Access to People**

In addition to difficulties with gaining access to the protest setting, lack of trust in outsiders also makes it difficult to find contacts or gatekeepers within the activist community (Hynes, 2003). When approaching the campaigners in the environmental campaign in Sweden, the first author did her utmost to be transparent regarding the research, herself, and her own pro-environmental values. We believe, which was also confirmed by participants, that her transparency facilitated in accessing participants and becoming embedded in the campaign.

However, transparency may get you access to the protest context, but once there you need to gain access to participants and gain (and earn) their trust. In addition to being a researcher, which made some of the campaigners suspicious towards the first author, some also commented on the fact that she 'looked' like an undercover police officer. More specifically, according to several activists, she had the ethnicity (i.e., white, as most Swedish police are white), physique, height, and age of the stereotypical Swedish police they expected to be used when the police wanted to gather intelligence. One campaigner expressed 'if I was the police commander I would send someone like you in, a kind next-door looking, non-threatening, female to gather information.' This could have been the beginning and end of our study of the campaign. Fortunately, however, the first author was able to facilitate the process of gaining initial trust within the campaign through two key elements: her previous

research and activism, and shared values with the campaigners. Negotiating the lack of trust was thus necessary which leads us to the next section.

### **Negotiating lack of trust**

‘Street cred’ or reputation through previous research (e.g., Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003), and/or having shared values or expectancies (e.g., Taylor, 2011) can facilitate in gaining access to participants. The Swedish activist community is not large. Since participants from the first author’s previous research within the Swedish left-wing ‘radical’ community (Vestergren, 2010) had conducted a thorough background check on her, they could validate her intentions as a fair and transparent researcher. This validation process was possible through some overlaps between members of the left-wing community and the environmental movement in Sweden. The first author had no involvement in this process. Fortunately, a couple of the activists were members of a group the first author had interviewed previously for another project (Vestergren 2010), and on completion shared the written-up findings of the project with all involved groups. Furthermore, as the first author was open with her own previous activism in environmental and anti-deportation campaigns it was quickly established that she and some of the campaigners had some common acquaintances. These common acquaintances verified her as a trustworthy person with pro-environmental values. We are not arguing that it is impossible to gain access to participants in settings where you do not have people that can verify and support you. However, in our study of the Swedish environmental campaign, we suggest that these two references were crucial in facilitating both deeper and less time-consuming access to the participants and their stories.

### **Shared values between researcher and participants**

It has been argued that having shared values with participants is not necessary to collect data (Hammersley, 2006). However, in our case, the shared values between the first author and the campaigners facilitated both gaining access to participants and gaining the campaigners' trust. This is related to the nature of the phenomena researched. In a protest context the researcher sometimes needs to take sides and embed themselves within the research context to achieve access to the setting and participants, and to give a more accurate account by gaining more in-depth data and understanding of the data (e.g., Drury & Stott, 2001; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996; Vestergren et al., 2018; 2019).

The shared values, background, and knowledge of the issues between the first author and the campaigners functioned as a stepping-stone for discussions. Through these discussions, based on having a common ground to stand on, the relationship between the first author and the campaigners started to build. In some sense, the first author and the campaigners shared a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) through identifying as pro-environmentalists which connected them to each other in a positive way. Shared identity has in previous research been shown to increase both helping and cooperative behaviour (e.g., Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009; Levine & Thompson, 2004; Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006), and having this shared identity and shared foundation to build upon most likely affected the participants' willingness to participate and share their experiences and information during the first author's time in the campaign (and after). This can be illustrated by one of the participants in the first interview. When the first author thanked them for participating in the study they replied 'of course I'll help, we Ojnare-fighters must stick together and help each other when we can.' Furthermore, identifying and having a deeper relationship with the participants in some protest contexts also enables for added richness in the data (Drury & Stott, 2001) and more honest data (Blake, 2007). Conversely, if the researcher is seen as an outsider the participants may be reluctant to share

information and/or be defensive in their responses. To limit this plausible alternation of the participants' responses, and to gain trust, the first author spent time with all the participants before the interview series started. However, we should note that this approach within the research context demands a lot of time, persistence, and patience.

### **3. Gaining Access to Stories**

In some studies, to gain access to stories the researcher needs to gain the participants' trust and be allowed to embed themselves within a campaign or protest; hence, there is a need for a relationship between the researcher and the campaigners to emerge (e.g., Adamson & Chojenta, 2007; Drury & Stott, 2001; Franklin, 2008; Wasserman & Jeffery, 2007). Through building these relationships, participants are given a chance to get used to, and get to 'know' the researcher (e.g., their values), which subsequently facilitates the building of trust (Wasserman & Jeffery, 2007). In this study, to build this relationship, the first author travelled to the campaign area to spend time with the campaigners both in and outside of the camp before asking them to participate in the research. In addition to participating in events in the forest, the first author also participated in events related to the campaign held in other areas of Sweden, such as environmental marches in Stockholm. Subsequently she was invited to stay in the camp and at the homes of some of the campaigners (both locals and activists in other areas of Sweden). This invitation to stay with some of the campaigners may be seen as a verification of a relationship and trust gained. Which leads us to the next section, the importance of mutual trust between participants and researcher.

#### **Mutual Trust Between Participants and Researcher**

The relationship between the first author and the campaigners was reciprocal, and just as important as it was for the campaigners to trust the first author it was equally important for

her to trust the campaigners (for more on trust in the field, see Alfadhli & Drury, 2020; Taylor, Nilsson, & Forero, 2020, this volume). The first author trusting the participants was a crucial part of this project as she was alone with the campaigners in the camp and their homes for long periods of time. Had the first author left the camp and gone home every night it would probably have taken longer to create the needed trust, and it would have been easier for the campaigners to see her as an outsider – a researcher who only comes during work hours to observe the subjects.

In addition to extending the trust between the first author and the participants, the closeness in the relationship furthered the first author's understanding of the participants' everyday life and process of enduring psychological changes. If the trust had not been reciprocal, this study would have had to be conducted from an outside perspective where data collection had been mainly through non-participatory observations and interviews collected without understanding the participants' everyday context. Hence, the data would have been affected and more prone to misunderstandings, misinterpretations and misrepresentations, consequently leading to a less accurately presented account of the participants' everyday lives and psychological changes. Being a lone researcher in a protest context can be challenging in various ways (see section 5 for discussion on risks and vulnerability). However, trusting the participants in the protest made the first author's experience comfortable and exciting rather than intimidating.

### **Participant Anonymity**

One challenge the first author had to deal with was the delicate balance between transparency and participant anonymity. We had to find a balance where we, on one side, wanted to conduct the study overtly where everyone knew that the first author was a researcher and their main reason for being there was the research. On the other side, we

wanted to keep individual participation in the study anonymous both within the campaign and outside of it. In other words, the first author had to find a balance between being a researcher and a campaign participant. This can be challenging when a researcher meets a participant outside of data collection. Is it a breach of anonymity if that researcher acknowledges the relationship? As everyone knew that the first author was a researcher, if she talked to the participants outside of the research context could they then be identified as participants? Do you say hello? To deal with this potential issue in relation to anonymity, the first author informed the participants about this limitation before they started their participation and discussed it with them throughout the study. For example, the first author discussed with all the participants how they wanted her to behave if they met outside of the interview situation. All participants wanted to be acknowledged and say hello; ‘don’t be awkward, just behave normal’ was the general sense.

To further avoid participant identification, the first author, from the start, made sure that she spent a good deal of time with other campaigners as well. The interviews were long and in depth, so the first author got to know the participants and their perspectives on the issue very well. Consequently, it would have been easy to only ‘hang out’ with the participants as they became very close. This in turn, could, by others, have been used to draw conclusions about who was participating in the study. Thereby, the participation in the study could become visible to observers both outside of the campaign and inside the campaign. A positive outcome of spending time with everyone, in addition to maintaining anonymity, was the building of trusting relationships with the activist community, in the campaign to save the forest, at large.

In addition to breaching the ethical requirement for research participant anonymity there is also, in some contexts, a risk of endangering participants if they are identified. For example, they might be seen as ‘traitors’ by some elements within the campaign, or the

information they give the researcher might be used put pressure on them or criminalize them by outgroups such as the police.

On occasion when we met outside of the study, participants did bring up things we had discussed in the interviews or information about other campaigners. There were also a couple of occasions where a participant wanted to know if anyone else had said anything about them. The first author never disclosed any information about who was in the study or brought up topics discussed outside of the study, nor did she follow up on the information that other participants had disclosed about participants or campaigners. It needs to be noted that in some contexts, for example where the activists are under surveillance by the government or other agencies, issues of anonymity such as being seen with the participants, and participants disclosing information about others might be a bigger issue and needs to be acknowledged and addressed to keep the participants safe. Even though this risk was not apparent within the Swedish protest context, it was discussed both within the research team and with the participants.

#### **4. Maintaining Access and Trust**

The study of the Swedish environmental campaign had a longitudinal design consisting of seven interviews with each participant over a period of 18 months; it was therefore crucial to keep the gained trust and access to the campaign over an extended period of time. During the 18 months the study took place, the first author made five longer visits to the campaign area and participated in several events in other places related to the campaign such as a national anti-mining march in Stockholm, court proceedings (in the quarry case)

and rallies related to the court proceedings, and smaller events such as group walks and *fika*<sup>3</sup> in the forest.

The researcher's involvement in the campaign outside of the direct interview situations facilitated in maintaining the trust. By participating in the campaign and related events, and spending time with the participants outside of the interviews, the relationship grew, and the shared identity was kept alive. During these events, even though being fully transparent about the research, the campaigners came to see the first author as 'one of us,' and her participation in the campaign, in the actions, and related events was on the same terms as the other campaigners. The first author was included in preparations of events (but never initiated actions or events), such as being included in planning discussions and more hands-on preparations, such as painting banners and placards. The inclusion of the first author in the ingroup could also be seen in the way the campaigners used the words 'we' and 'us' when referring to themselves and the first author. For example, one participant explicitly stated that they did not see the first author as anything other than a fellow campaigner in a discussion about the state of universities in Sweden:

I've forgotten that you're actually a researcher, it's like, I mean you're in this as much as I am, and we're all the same, fighting for the same, you're just one of us, erm I can't imagine us stopping this [spending time together].

Being 'one of us' and identifying with the campaigners, can be, and in this case most likely was, key in maintaining the relationships and the trust, consequently also the participation (Hynes, 2003; Ronald, 2011) throughout the study. Part of this was also to show interest in what the campaigners do and think outside of the campaign. This also shows that you as a researcher are willing to make an effort. To be honest, why should the participants give you

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<sup>3</sup> An everyday feature of Swedish culture that can be described as a collective, informal, coffee and pastry break with social features.



all that time if you are not willing to make an effort and giving them your time?

Consequently, the first author put a lot of time and effort into the reciprocal give-take relationship. This again adds to the time-consuming element of this type of research.

### **Negotiation between being one with the group and distancing yourself from the group**

Building long-term relationships are, for some studies, not without subsequent challenges. For example, it can be very hard to distance yourself from your participants. In her research in the queer community, Taylor (2011) found that, through applying her own caution and censorship she marked parts of the data in the transcripts as ‘off the record’ (p. 14). Furthermore, she felt that she wanted to present the participants in a positive way so they would not be offended by the subsequent report. Ironically, the study of the Swedish environmental campaign aimed to explore psychological changes through participation in collective action (Vestergren et al., 2018, 2019) but at the end it was not only the participants who had changed. Through the involvement in the campaign and the relationships with the campaigners the first author found that she too had changed as a result of the participation. In her case, this was not much of an issue (at least not to her). She did not change radically but became more convinced in her values and actions. For example, her diet has been mainly vegetarian for many years. However, as she got more involved in the campaign, and over time, her consumption behavior changed towards the values of the campaign and today she holds a mainly vegan diet, only uses organic and plastic free shampoo bars, soaps, and conditioners and only washes her hair once a week. These changes are in line with the environmental values of the campaign, the values related to saving the earth and protecting human rights. It could also be argued that her views have become more radical and changed what she sees as legitimate behavior. Would she, before her involvement in the campaign,

had put post-it notes on products at her local supermarket highlighting the use of palm oil and extensive unnecessary use of plastics? Possibly, but probably not with the same confidence.

Even though the changes the first author went through as a result of her involvement in the research and the relationships with the campaigners can be regarded as small, it points to the need to reflect upon how our embeddedness affects our research and ourselves (see Aydemir & Bayad, 2020 in this volume for a more detailed discussion). It is suggested that the researcher reflects on the effect and impact of the relationships throughout the project and reports reflexivity (e.g., Gilbert, 1994; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Taylor, 2011).

In ethnographic research, as most qualitative research, we reflect upon which perspective to include to provide useful data for the research question and analyses. Sharing values with the participants might affect how we generate and interpret our findings. There is a tendency for us to want to present our own group, our shared identity, in a positive way (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The social identity approach argues that we value opinions from the ingroup more and also perceive them as more accurate compared to outgroups. Hence, there is a possibility that in both generating themes and interpreting the findings we might present participants and our results in a more positive way as a result of sharing values and identity. For example, actions that outsiders might define as illegitimate and non-normative might be seen as legitimate and normative by us. Most of our findings regarding the types of psychological changes had on some level been identified or implied in previous research (for a review see Vestergren, Drury, & Hammar Chiriac, 2017) which made us certain that it was not generated solely based on shared values with the campaigners. In fact, we would argue that in this study the shared identity and values were instrumental in generating and interpreting the findings to create a more accurate account of the participants' experiences of participating in the campaign. However, being aware of such influences in the data analysis is important.

## **Shared identity and avoiding outgroups**

The most crucial element in maintaining trust and participation in this study was related to taking sides and sharing identity. By sharing identity, it is expected that we share the same views, we support each other's views and actions, and we share the same opposition and outgroups. To be able to achieve and maintain access and trust, the first author avoided interaction with members of outgroups, such as the police, the pro-quarry group, and the companies involved in the preparation work, throughout the study. If we had striven for an all-inclusive account of the events during the campaign, and spent as much time with the outgroups – that is the police, the mining company and the pro-quarry activists – the campaigners could have perceived the first author as 'other' and part of the outgroup, that is, in collaboration with the police, for example (Adamson & Chojenta, 2007; Drury & Stott, 2001).

If the first author had been categorized as 'one of them' (compared to 'one of us') it would very likely have led to restricted access or total rejection from the campaigners. For example, in a study of car-modifying groups the ethnographers encountered issues with gaining access to data and participants, and found themselves in a dangerous situation, due to being seen as an outsider (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2011). In the case with the car-modifiers the first author had access to other car-modifying groups and could thereby carry out the study (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2007). However, for a study of conflicts or protest campaigns, as the Swedish environmental campaign, there may not be more groups to rely on for the study to be carried out. If you aim to collect data over an extensive period of time, knowing who is in and who is out might be very helpful. If you are not embedded within the context you are researching, you may not be aware of which groups are considered to be outgroups. This lack of inside knowledge might in turn make you vulnerable, and as a

consequence, from the campaigners' perspective, you might become part of the outgroup (see also Bilewicz, 2020; Karasu & Ulug, 2020 in this volume). We would argue that some projects are only feasible if conducted on a basis where the researcher positions themselves on the same side of the conflict as their participants.

The need for subjectivity, in the form of taking sides, and embeddedness has been highlighted in relation to previous research within the protest and collective action context (Drury & Stott, 2001; Stott & Drury, 2000), and as noted by Reicher and Hopkins (1996), research can never be completely objective. For example, Whyte (1993), in his study of street gangs, argued that through his subjectivity and embedding himself in the context with the participants he was able to extend his data in unexpected ways by getting information and answers to questions he did not know that he wanted to ask.

Furthermore, the researcher's pre-existing knowledge has been suggested to function as a strength rather than a weakness as it increases the researcher's understanding of the concepts (Billig, 1995; Ronald, 2011). In fact, understanding the population and the issues researchers face can be seen as essential to be able to conduct some studies and produce a more accurate analysis (Drury & Stott, 2011; Feldman et al., 2003; Johl & Renganathan, 2010; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996; Stott & Drury, 2000). In the study of the Swedish environmental campaign participants, the first author's pre-existing knowledge of the campaign issues, insights in protest structure and boundaries and limits, both facilitated gaining trust and maintaining that trust.

### **Giving back to the participants**

As in most long-term relationships, you have to give something to get something in return. One way to maintain participants over time is to give them something back (Gilbert, 1994). In addition to giving back in the form of physically being involved in actions and

events, the first author offered to give talks and workshops about her research area to groups and organizations that were involved in the campaign. These offers were always very well received and welcomed by the campaigners. For example, during the study, the first author gave a couple of talks mainly focused on general crowd psychology research, to not bias the participants if they were in the audience. These talks included the history of crowd psychology and discussions such as crowd control versus crowd management. The talks were well attended and given both in the forest camp and in other locations, chosen by groups/organizations related to the campaign, such as the annual meeting for the youth organization the Fieldbiologists (a main participant in the Ojnare campaign). Through these early talks, the first author also had the opportunity to outline the intentions concerning the research which in turn could have decreased some remaining mistrust from some campaigners. After the study was concluded, the talk and workshop focused more on protest participation, such as models of predicted participation and psychological consequences of participation in collective actions. For example, the first author and the audience, mainly consisting of people involved in the campaign, went through the events in the forest and analyzed key events and how they might have affected campaigners and the campaign in general using concepts from crowd psychology. The feedback from the audience also contributed to the first author being able to confirm her timeline of events and analysis of the events and campaign participation. All talks were well received and helped maintain the transparency of the research and trust in the researcher.

We also, to maintain transparency and trust, gave the participants opportunities to influence the research further. This was done to further understand the results and also give the participants an opportunity to clarify and impact the research. The data was discussed with the participants throughout the project to identify areas that we as researchers might have missed, devalued, or misunderstood. Several of the participants expressed how the

continuous discussions about the data made them feel heard and important. These discussions were often in lines of the first author asking ‘you told me last time that you...’, ‘what did you mean by [ ], what does that mean to you’, or ‘did I understand this correctly.’ These discussions also allowed for the participants to ask questions; some of the questions in the earlier discussions, directly linked to the research topic psychological change, could not be answered fully as that could have affected the subsequent data collection. However, the first author wrote these questions down and answered them after the study was concluded.

Making the participants involved in the research on a deeper level throughout the study might also make them feel more invested in the project and more willing to maintain in their participation, as they experienced that they were ‘getting their voices heard.’ After the data was collected, the first author discussed the findings with the participants, and a few other campaigners. These discussions started with the first author talking through the findings, and then followed up with questions such as ‘do you feel that any of these findings apply to you’ and ‘is there anything you think that I [first author] might have missed or misinterpreted?’. The continuous discussions also empowered the participants; they expressed that they experienced more agency and involvement in the project rather than feeling as they were subjects with no influence. For example, after discussing the results with one of the participants the first author received written feedback where the participant described how these inclusive discussions made them ‘feel part of the research’ and ‘own my story rather than having it become some poorly produced sequel.’

For example, the chapter you are reading right now has been discussed with two of the participants. In the early stages of drafting this chapter the first author briefly discussed her experiences of conducting the study to get a sense of whether there was some consensus between her experience and the participants’. The participants confirmed that the first author’s experiences were in line with their own views regarding the experiences and

procedures. In the next step, the first author sent the participants an early draft of the chapter and asked for any feedback on events, experiences, misinterpretations, disagreements etcetera. The participants confirmed the first authors' experiences and outlined methods, but even more importantly, they highlighted further issues related to risks regarding the participants' privacy and loss of trust (now included in the chapter) that the first author had not reflected upon, such as the risk of participants turning against the researcher as a consequence of loss of trust. By involving the campaigners in this way, we were able to present the findings in a way that reflected the participants' view and confirm our results within the studied population. That is, our strategies in gaining access and trust and maintaining the trust was not only seen as appropriate by us but also by the campaigners (e.g., Brydon-Miller, 1997; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Meyer, 2000).

Generally in research, the researcher has the power to decide how the data is presented in the final report. By including the participants in discussions beyond the data collection, the boundaries in power relations are made more flexible. Hence, involving the participants in more than just the obtaining of data gives them a sense of inclusion and power and adds valuable insights into their understanding of the situation along with an input on how you have dealt with the data material. They are more than just *research subjects*. This inclusion throughout the study, as far as was possible, increased the campaigners' trust in the first author both during and after the study. This process whereby the participants validated (or challenged) our interpretations also increased our confidence in making both theoretical and methodological conclusions. Furthermore, the validation of our methodological approach suggests that adopting similar designs, taking sides and building relationships beyond the study, could be valuable and work for other researchers in similar protest settings. In the previous sections we have highlighted challenges and advantages, for the research, of embedding yourself in your research context and taking sides in conflicts. However, by

embedding yourself in your research population you as a researcher can become vulnerable and at risk.

## **5. Becoming Vulnerable and Being at Risk in the Field**

Taking sides can function as a solution, or at least part of the solution, for several of the challenges discussed in the sections above. For example, the second author found when studying a protest against the building of the M11 Link Road outside of London, that due to the importance of keeping actions secret the most appropriate way, and only way, to collect data was to get involved in the campaign (Drury & Reicher, 2000). The consideration of taking sides is highly relevant when discussing the risks and safeguards for researching and embedding yourself within protests contexts. In this section we discuss risks the researcher may face when taking sides, related to threats/violence from outgroups, researcher vulnerability regarding privacy and power relations, and loss of trust.

### **Threats/violence from outgroups**

Being categorized as ‘one of us’ and being part of the campaign group can have a dark side. The campaigners were not the only ones that categorized the first author as one of them [the campaigners], so did the police and the pro-quarry protesters. For example, the first author was ‘kettled<sup>4</sup>’ along with the other protesters and forced to sit in a line on the ground for about 30 minutes when attending a protest, and a small group of pro-quarry locals shouted profanities at her during one visit to the island. Being seen as one of the activists can put the researcher in a vulnerable and potentially dangerous situation with a risk of arrest, abuse, or even violence from opposing groups (Whyte, 1993). In his participatory observations of the

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<sup>4</sup> A police tactic attempting to control crowds by indiscriminately surrounding a group of people. The corralling can for example involve police officers coming from all sides, or vans used to trap protesters from all sides (e.g., Fenwick, 2009).



No M11 Link Road campaign, the second author became part of the activist ingroup (Drury & Stott, 2011). For him this meant being forcefully removed from the area they were occupying, being arrested, as well as being denied interviews and data from the police.

In the study of the Swedish environmental campaign, there was very little abuse, other than verbal profanities, from the opposing pro-quarry activist group. They did on a few occasions protest outside of the camp screaming and shouting. The campaigners were also in conflict with the police and were forcefully evicted from deforestation areas at several occasions. In the clashes with the police none of the campaigners got badly injured. However, there were some minor scrapes and bruises along with the psychological distress of being detained and/or forcefully evicted from the area. For researchers studying protest contexts, identifying with, and being identified as one of the protesters exposes the researcher to risk from actions taken by outgroups.

**The ingroup as safeguard.** When researchers become at risk to actions from outgroups, one safeguard could be the ingroup. The trust that is built through the relationships between researcher and participants can add to the creation of a safe research environment (Blake, 2007). These relationships and becoming an ingroup member also mean that the ingroup is more likely to support you (Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson, & Rapley, 2005; Drury & Reicher, 2005). In vulnerable or threatening situations, the ingroup is likely to come to your aid and protect you, if possible, from outside forces. Hence, the relationship not only facilitates gaining and maintaining trust, it can also function to keep you safe during your research. In a way, in protest contexts, the idea of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ can create a safety collective. Apart from the shouting at the camp, there were no other threatening situations when the first author was in the camp. However, the safeguarding also had a proactive element as the campaigners pointed out members of outgroups, in less

obvious situations such as in town or in court, to the first author and told her who she should stay away from to avoid abuse. This safeguarding was not only regarding the outgroups; the campaigners kept the first author safe in various ways, such as pointing out dangers in the area of the camp and what to look out for, and made sure that she had a bed, a roof over her head, and food to eat – as they would have done for any ingroup member.

### **Researcher vulnerability**

After gaining access and trust and being invited into the campaign you as a researcher may become visibly vulnerable in your position. On one side, this could show the campaigners that you come in good faith, thereby building trust and relationships further (Blake, 2007; Taylor, 2011). However, on the other side, it exposes the researcher to threatening and dangerous situations within the campaign.

**Privacy and power relations between researcher and participants.** There are risks that are less apparent, related to power relation between the researcher and participants, that we need to address and reflect upon while in the field. For example, the first author was exposed to private elements of participants' lives beyond the aims and scope for the research. Depending on the content and nature of such private information, it can put the researcher in a difficult position. The first author made the decision not to bring up such privacy related topics or information in interviews or outside of the interviews. However, what was considered private, or sensitive, was based solely on the first author's judgment.

Furthermore, the researcher might be given information from the participants that might put the participants or the researcher at risk – in this case, information such as revealing criminal activity. As the first author was aware that information, such as criminal activity, might be disclosed during the study, she had consulted the University's legal

department to ensure that she was not required to share or report any information with third parties or authorities.

By disclosing information such as criminal activity or inviting the researcher into more private elements of their lives the power relations between researcher and participant can become even more asymmetrical. If trust is lost between the participant and the researcher at this level, there might be a risk that the participant turns against the researcher as they ‘know too much’. The first author did not regard this as a possible risk until it was brought up by the campaigners; however, this might be a bigger issue in other contexts and where the content of the information is of greater value or risk for the participant/s.

**Loss of trust.** If a researcher does not gain trust, or loses the trust of the campaigners, she risks being seen as an outsider and/or part of the outgroup, which in turn can end in a potentially dangerous situation where the researcher is out of control of the situation (Nilan, 2002). As activists often are suspicious towards outsiders and newcomers (Blee, 2003; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Jipson & Litton, 2000; Sanders-McDonagh, 2014) it may not take much for them to lose trust and suspect the researcher of being, for example, undercover police (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) and being treated as such thereafter. It might seem easy to pretend that you are sharing values and experiences with your participants to gain instant access and trust or agreeing with protesters out of fear of being excluded from the community. However, we strongly advise against this. Pretending that you are something you are not when spending an extensive time with a group will make you vulnerable and it is likely that the participants will see through your ‘cover.’ The first author did not always agree with individual campaigners’ opinions or actions during her time in the campaign. However, rather than hiding this she gave a rationale for her view and through this she gained more trust and respect within the protest community. It should be noted though that the first author

did share the core values regarding human rights and the environment with the campaigners, so the disagreements were never big and did not contradict core values and/or expectancies.

The first author made sure to be transparent both about her research and herself as a person as far as possible throughout the study. Throughout her time in the campaign and with the campaigners the first author never felt uncomfortable or unsafe and there were no unsafe or threatening situations created by the relationship and actions between her and the campaigners.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter we have discussed and problematized challenges faced during a longitudinal ethnographic study within the Swedish environmental protest context. This adds to previous research by identifying and describing challenges and processes for solutions while in the protest context. In particular, we have discussed the importance of, in some studies, taking sides and continuously negotiating our own role and the participants' safety without misusing the gained trust to achieve our own aims. There are general similarities between the different phases (i.e., gaining access and trust and maintaining access and trust) of the research process. For example, the relationship with the participants and other campaigners was a necessity throughout the study. However, there are some differences in the procedure and content of the process in the different phases. For example, when gaining access you need to prove yourself to be an honest person on 'the right side' to start building the relationship, then when gaining trust you need to focus more on creating or becoming part of the shared identity, and finally in order to maintain the relationships you need to show that you are part of the group through, for example, involving yourself more and also involving the participants more in the research. For all of these phases there was in this study a necessity to taking the side of the campaigners/protesters.

Even though there might be differences in the content of protests, and differences in the responses to the protests globally, we do consider the challenges faced and processes discussed, in relation to gaining and maintaining access and trust to protest contexts as general and universal, and the experiences outlined in this chapter useful for protest researchers globally. In sum, when working in protest contexts there is a need to find a methodological design that fits with the specific setting and ensures that the researcher and participants are not exposed to unnecessary risks. For us, this meant being honest, transparent, and taking sides. This design facilitated gaining access and trust and maintaining that access and trust. Furthermore, it helped safeguard the first author while in the field.

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