

# EMPATHY AND MUTUALITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: REFLECTIONS FROM THREE DIFFERENT RESEARCH FIELDS

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This article discusses the authors' reflections on empathy in the context of fieldwork on feminist activism in small towns in Poland and Eastern Germany. Our methodological reflection is further enriched by our referencing of challenges faced in researching activists mobilising for protests against COVID-19 measures. While the role and impact of an empathic approach to data collection and interpretation have been controversial since the 'erklären-verstehen controversy', empathy can be understood in very different ways, ranging from sympathy or compassion to the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes. Against the backdrop of our case studies, we focus on the openness and curiosity we showed toward our interviewees' emotions and experiences, despite ideological or socio-cultural differences between us. The key themes of our discussion include the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects, the impact of this relationship on the research process, the constantly changing conditions for interpretative social research, and the impact of such changes on the use of empathy.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, empathy, feminist research, fieldwork with 'unloved groups', activism

## INTRODUCTION

We are a team of researchers who (along with Grzegorz Piotrowski) have realised an interview-based project on feminist activism in small and peripheral towns in Poland and East Germany financed by the Polish-German Science Foundation (project number 2020–08). Magdalena Muszel conducted interviews with feminist women activists in Poland and Corinna Trogisch with similar activists in East Germany. As a point of comparison, Piotr Kocyba has regularly drawn on his experience in researching the far-right or organisers of protests against COVID-19 measures (Anti-Covid activists, in short) in Germany and Poland. He is leading a project on public manifestations in Poland and is a member of a research team conducting a German-Polish comparison

here.<sup>1</sup> We realized that interviews develop a largely different dynamic in each research process. This, in turn, led us to reflect on the hurdles involved in field access, and on the realisation of interviews on sensitive topics in general, as well as on the influence of the researcher's position in relation to the researched activists. In this preliminary study, we present the first outcomes of these discussions, reflecting on empathy in research relations.

#### THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF EMPATHY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The concept of empathy has a central place in disciplines such as psychology, but it is also to be found in political debates. A case in point is the accusation of the 'radical denial of empathy' laid at the door of far-right political movements during the so-called migration crises (Ulbricht 2017, 204). There is also a wide range of circulating definitions of empathy, some of which overlap or complement each other while others contradict. For example, the social psychologist Daniel C. Batson has collected eight different conceptualizations of empathy: (1) Knowing another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings; (2) Adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other; (3) Coming to feel as another person feels; (4) Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation; (5) Imagining how another is thinking and feeling; (6) Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place; (7) Feeling distress at witnessing another person's suffering; and (8) Feeling for another person who is suffering (Batson 2009, 4–8). This list indicates that in anthropology the concept of empathy "is rarely, if ever, considered an unambiguously good thing" (Hollan and Throop 2008, 389), and is very often thought of as bringing "accidental baggage," to quote Peter Hervik (2021, 99). This "scepticism" originates in the debate about the distinctness of humanities and natural sciences and finds its key manifestation in philosophical hermeneutics. Essential here is the "Erklären-Verstehen controversy" (discussed in depth in Apel 1982) in which a rational, objective, and scientific approach is in opposition to a psychologizing, irrational, and subjective one – the latter associated with empathy (a typologizing overview can be found in Kubik 1984, 21).

In consequence, empathy as a "reexperience of original intentions" is rejected (Kögler and Stueber 2018, 29) and regular warnings abound against the danger of the projection of our own predispositions on our interviewees (Hollan 2008, 477–480). Even if developmental psychology or research on mirror neurons has trended towards

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<sup>1</sup> See the project "Turmoil of Civil Society in Poland" financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Project number 01UL1816X) and a project on conspiracy narratives amongst protestors against COVID-19 restrictions conducted at the Dresden-based Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

understanding empathy as “feeling what someone else feels” or “imagining oneself in another’s situation” (Coplan 2011, 3–4), we are very much aware that an empathic process in qualitative, interview-based studies cannot be simply about experiencing the motivations of the respondent by putting oneself in his/her shoes. However, this does not mean that – as an auxiliary method – empathy in the sense of “*Einfühlung*, meaning ‘feeling into’ or perhaps ‘feeling one’s way inside,’” (Kohut 2020, 1) could not be a useful source for, for example, generating hypotheses (Kubik 1984, 20). However, it is not our intention to add to the theoretical Erklären-Verstehen debate. Our understanding of empathy refers rather to a basic ability to approach other individuals in an open-minded manner and with a genuine interest in their perspectives and narratives – regardless of one’s own position. Of six different understandings of empathy as enumerated by Amy Coplan, all of which are more or less psychologizing and which are related to *erleben*, *empfinden* or *nacherleben*, the following is closest to us: “Being emotionally affected by [instead we term it ‘being open to’] someone else’s emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions.” (Coplan 2011, 4) This seemingly simple statement only gains a more complex reading when, through significant differences in ideological or socio-cultural embedding, openness is hard (sometimes even seemingly impossible) to be established.

Such an understanding of empathy has consequences for what happens before research work even begins; in our ability to gain access to the field, for example. This is especially true for “unloved groups” – a term coined by Nigel G. Fielding to describe groups that scholars assess as actively hostile or frightening and sometimes even feel morally superior of: groups that in academia and within wider society are often stigmatized (Fielding 1993, 148; Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 242). Such activists often not only have the (partially correct) feeling that they are misunderstood but that – much worse from their perspective – outsiders do not even try to understand. The consequence of this may be a retreat into parallel public spheres separated by seemingly insurmountable empathy walls, as described by Arlie R. Hochschild (2016, 5–8). Most importantly for our purpose, however, offering an empathetic willingness to understand can be a convincing argument for potential respondents to agree to be interviewed in the first place – despite their distrust of social scientists, who are often perceived as representatives of a hostile mainstream or state, or even as political enemies. Against this background, and as Hervik notes in the context of research on the far right, “empathy and mutuality are keys to overcoming social and cultural differences” (Hervik 2021, 100).

Furthermore, we would argue that empathy is also an ethical requirement. When interviewing (sometimes even violent) activists whose attitudes and actions are considered dangerous, we are not dealing with “beasts” but human beings with their own individual motives and concerns whose actions are situated within a personal history and social structure. Leaving aside ethical questions, Agnieszka Pasięka warns

rightly about constructing an “absolute, repulsive otherness” (2019, 3). Thus, despite the professional and methodological pitfalls involved in researching “unloved groups,” unlike Erin Sanders-McDonagh, we prefer not to describe work on right-wing activists as “dirty research” (Sanders-McDonagh 2014). Instead of exoticizing “unloved,” “deceitful,” “distasteful,” etc. activists, we should treat them with the same fairness, curiosity, and openness as organisers whose activism we support or even admire. If we accept the humanity of our interviewees and all the contradictions and complexities which that entails, it will not come as a surprise that some of them might even be quite likeable (Blee 1998, 392; Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 234). Thus, the real paradox researchers experience is “that we have come to like some of the research participants, despite detesting their political views” (Pasieka 2019, 4).

Sympathy and friendship as concepts are close to empathy but they are still quite different. It seems that empathy is regularly confused with sympathy, the latter often adopted in “studying down” and “if necessary and appropriate, combined with advocacy” (Gingrich 2013, 124). This is true for anthropology, where, for example, respect for cultural diversity seems to be not only an ethical imperative but a necessary prerequisite of analysis. Sociologists also tend to ‘take sides’ and support vulnerable or socially excluded groups through their research (Smyth and Mitchell 2008, 442). This trend is perhaps particularly evident among social movement scholars where ‘advocative research’ has become a prominent ideal. Dieter Rucht (2016, 473) showed that the majority of his colleagues not only supported the movements they studied but also considered themselves to be part of these movements. There is even a conviction among some researchers “that serious and solid knowledge cannot be acquired without being part and parcel of the group or movement under study” (Rucht 2019, 150). But advocacy and an insider position can generate about as many obstacles for understanding as distance.

Historically, the deep identification of a researcher with his or her research subject had its roots in opposition to traditional hierarchies embedded in the research relationship, namely an objectifying hierarchy between mostly male, privileged, and white researchers and their informants. One of the most famous feminist contributions to this debate is found in Ann Oakley’s 1981 paper “Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms?” in which the author reflects on what it means for a feminist to interview women. Two important directives for our own research can be derived from this work. Firstly, the conviction that feminist research is to be understood “as an essential way of giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility not only in sociology but, more importantly, in society” (Oakley 1981, 48). This kind of advocacy may have seemed quite appropriate and reasonable in the (1980s) context of efforts to promote women’s rights and gender justice, but the limits of it are clearly visible when dealing with, for example, the far right. In the latter, it is precisely the potential increase in visibility through research that is regularly warned against (Blee 2018a, 7; Mondon and Winter

2021, 374–375). Scholars of the far-right speak in this context of the danger of amplifying and becoming complicit with ideologies of inequality (Kocyba and Sommer 2022).

The second important point is Oakley's attempt to be perceived by the interviewed women as a friend rather than a data collector (Oakley 1981, 47). In reference to Ferdinand Zweig's *Labor, Life and Poverty* (1949) she observes that "finding out about other peoples' lives is much more readily done on the basis of friendship than in a formal interview" (ibid., 52). Such arguments were motivated by the need to abandon the hierarchical rapport between researcher and (most often *his*) "object" and engage with informants on a more equal basis or even to closely identify with the research subject.<sup>2</sup> This becomes very clear when contrasting the notion of friendship with two points made by Andre Gingrich. Firstly, insight cannot be achieved through sympathy. We cannot understand someone better just because we like them or because we are friends (sometimes too much closeness makes it even difficult to understand the decisions or motives of others). Instead, the key to understanding lies in being open and curious about the beliefs and perspectives of the interviewed person – despite societal, ideological, or emotional closeness or distance. Therefore, secondly, empathy "does not necessarily impose any obligation for sympathy" (Gingrich 2013, 124). We do not have to "like" those we try to empathize with – especially if we keep in mind our understanding of empathy as being open to someone else's perception of the world and actions. On the contrary, sometimes, irritation is even helpful in triggering real interest in our interviewees' positions (Luff 1999, 697).

#### "UNLOVED GROUPS" – RELATIVITY OF STIGMATISATION

It is worth noting that in the cases of the Polish and East German activists of progressive women's movements interviewed here, both scholars conducting the research were themselves committed feminists. The relevance of such closeness between researcher and subject has been well documented since the 1960s (DeVault and Gross 2006, 176–178). In contrast, this subject-researcher relationship in studying activists against COVID-19 restrictions proves much more nuanced. Not all actors or groups in this field belong to the (regressive) far-right, with only a minority having an affinity for violence, and not all believing in (anti-Semitic) conspiracy narratives. Some formulate valid criticism of particular COVID-19 measures, whilst others doubt the dangerousness of the virus or question the pandemic as such (Nachtwey et al. 2020; Grande et al. 2021; Koos 2021). Yet, undoubtedly, demonstrators against COVID-19 restrictions represent an "unloved group". Regularly, only the shrillest protest voices become the

2 See also Oakley's "review" of her initial article more than 30 years later where she mentions a "simplistic notion of friendship among women interviewing women" of the time (Oakley 2016, 198).

main subject of reporting, and press coverage paints them as hostile to science, anti-semitic, mentally unstable, and violent towards the police (Waldhaus 2021, 59; Mauer et al. 2021, 50–51). Thus, as an “unloved group,” Anti-Covid activists are exposed to stigmatisation. As the pandemic continues, unvaccinated activists may even become subject to social exclusion and potential sanctions.

Historically, ‘women’ might also be described as an “unloved group” – misogynous perceptions, chastity norms, work expectations, and violence in its blatant and subtle forms characterised the lives of many women, and defined decades of the feminist movement’s activity, as well as research. In the case of outspoken feminist activists opposing the prevailing gender order, Sara Ahmed (2017, 21) put it well when talking about their “unloved state”: “We learn about the feminist cause by the bother feminism causes; by how feminism comes up in public culture as a site of disturbance” in an otherwise well-functioning social fabric. Thus, who is ‘unloved’ reflects not only a perspective – it reveals the conjuncture of broad and long-term social struggles.

One point of departure for us is that whatever group we research, we have to make use of empathy. Here, we explicitly do not mean affective sharing such as sympathy or compassion, but empathy in the sense of curiosity – despite sometimes far-reaching disagreements in the assessment of social and political developments or of the personal behaviour of our interviewees (when it comes to the question of wearing masks, for example). Similar to Hochschild, who values “empathy bridges” to better understand what she describes as the “great paradox” (Hochschild 2016, xi, 8–16), we are explicitly not interested in trying to learn to like someone, but in better understanding of someone’s actions or beliefs that may seem implausible to us. Furthermore, it has become clear to us that it is nothing new when an interviewee discloses attitudes that are not congruent with what the researcher deems progressive or associated with human rights. Hence, like many researchers before us (Blee 1998; Ostrander 1984), we may encounter ‘unlovable’ traits in otherwise ‘loved’ contexts. Yet, without doubt, the relationship between researcher and subject influences the generation and interpretation of empirical data. Against the background of our introductory reflections, we now wish to focus on how an empathic relationship with research subjects affects positioning in the field and the research process.

#### WOMEN’S ACTIVISM IN SMALL TOWNS IN POLAND – AN EMBRACING FIELD

Since 2018, I (Magdalena Muszel) have been conducting intensive research on the feminist movement in Poland, which has included over 40 interviews with women leaders of the Women’s Strike, mainly from small towns in Poland. At the same time, I am a committed feminist activist who has more than once met my interviewees at demonstrations or participated in projects for women. Therefore, I define myself as

a participatory researcher, a position which differs from scientific tradition in that my research is conducted through the subjectivity of the researcher and the relationships which are formed between the researcher and the respondents. Through regular interaction with and participation in the activities of the movement, I am engaged in a position that identifies me as both researcher and movement member. My experiences have led me to reflect on the role of empathy and self-consciousness in the research process, as well as the benefits and risks this look “from the inside” brings.

It should be stressed from the outset that, despite a widespread public support for the feminist demands underlying women’s protests in Poland, the very notion of feminism continues to be stigmatized,<sup>3</sup> and consequently, protest leaders who loudly identify as feminists are seen as controversial in the eyes of the majority of public opinion. Thus, it is not surprising that many feminist leaders in Poland have a jaundiced view of people, including researchers, who are suspected of being hostile to the movement and thus of trying to undermine the values it stands for.

Therefore, my activist involvement in the feminist movement and a fairly wide network of contacts within the feminist activist community legitimizes me in the eyes of my female interviewees as a trustworthy person, and I am not suspected of trying to use my knowledge and the information gathered during the research process to undermine the movement in any way. Megan Blake makes the point that:

Most researchers have heard cautionary tales against ‘going native,’ or witnessed the research of others being dismissed as anecdotal, partisan or amateurish because the subjects of the research were already known prior to starting the project [...]. But considering that trust arises from within relationships at a personal level, ‘going native’ is perhaps a better way to create an honest, trustworthy and ‘safe’ research environment. (Blake 2007, 415)

Researcher by virtue of being “insiders” in specific communities can understand and empathise with participants’ viewpoints (Oakley 1981). Due to the possession of similar values and goals in terms of women’s rights, as well as a personal history that predates the research engagement, my position as a trustworthy person, an “insider” of the movement, has often been strengthened by interviewees’ references to jointly undertaken

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3 Studies conducted in Poland including (Mandal and Kofta 2009; Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020) show that being a feminist in Poland contains a real stigma and indicates that women who admit to this are treated with aversion. Feminists contest the patriarchal social order based on male domination, in which the status of women is automatically low. The aggressiveness attributed to feminists violates the cultural schema of women as gentle, soft, caring and compliant beings (Kofta and Mandal 2009). A key role, especially on issues such as the defence of traditional gender roles and the sacralisation of motherhood, is played by the Roman Catholic Church, which simultaneously constructs a moral criminalisation of women’s self-determination. This rhetoric, supported by right-wing Polish politicians, is the basis of policies oriented toward formally supporting the reproductive role of women, which, in reality, are aimed at controlling women’s bodies and choices (Hall 2019) and thus stigmatises the feminist movement, which fights for, among other things, abortion rights.

actions, protests or mutual activist friends. When using the “we-they” divide, my interviewees automatically assigned me to the “we” group, and a clear desire to help and cooperate in my research was often expressed. I was also seen as a credible ambassador for the movement in academia. Last but not least, my “movement insider” status has made it much easier for me to get access to other leaders of the movement, whom I wished to interview.

My position as a researcher and committed feminist meant that my sharing of common values and beliefs was assumed. Very often my interviewees would also assume that I knew and understood their values and experiences. This meant that during the research process, certain “obvious” statements may not have been explained, clarified, or were simply passed off as irrelevant or belonging to “common knowledge” shared by both interviewer and interviewee. This unconscious and sometimes possibly false belief in a commonality of values and an identical interpretation of shared experiences creates the risk of further misinterpretations, as it may eventually turn out that some issues are not understood or interpreted in the same way by both sides.

Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to strive to remain as open as possible to the respondent’s story, while suppressing, at least initially, his or her own memories or understanding in order to be able to perceive the situations described by the respondent, through their own eyes. By postponing the use of self-consciousness, empathy and my own experiences until a later stage, I - as researcher - have the chance to participate in another’s positioning of themselves from a unique perspective within a situation. While maintaining my own position as a researcher, I allowed myself to follow the respondent’s path to their own experience only gradually. The empathic approach of the researcher does not entail putting on another person’s shoes but to remain open to the respondent’s perspective while leaving her or his own context and understanding to one side.

For the researcher who is also an activist, a delicate balancing act is required as a person being ‘researched’ should be permitted to distil their experiences without imposing the researcher’s own beliefs and perspectives. This requires a great deal of sensitivity, awareness, openness, and practice. Larry Davidson compared this to the situation of an actor learning to take on the role of a new character and suggested that researchers can use similar techniques to build imaginative bridges between their own experiences and those of their respondents (Davidson 2003, 121). The danger of imaginative self-transposal, whereby one spontaneously and imaginatively transposes oneself into another’s emotions, feelings, values, and beliefs, shapes the relationship between researcher-activist and respondent to a large extent (Husserl 1966, as cited in Depraz 2001, 451).

During my fieldwork, I became deeply convinced that these imaginative bridges are stronger if they are built through a dialogue that prevents us from simply projecting ourselves into the world of the interviewee. Moreover, bearing in mind that the



researcher proceeds to an interpretation with a lot of pre-existing “baggage” from prior field research, the more dialogue, conversation, and explanation there is in the research process, the more likely it is that it will generate a solid and reliable interpretation. Russell Walsh (2004) and Maree Burns (2003) argued that qualitative researchers should be conscious of how easily they can “disembody” their respondents through their adoption of certain techniques and procedures and thus be perceived as critical and judgmental. Considering this, they suggest engaging in “dialogues” between researcher and respondent, rather than conducting interviews in the “classic” way.

Another cause for concern I encountered when doing fieldwork is insider friendships and the impact these may have upon the research process and interpretation. Jodie Taylor said:

When one is already, at some level, an insider in their field, it is probable that they have pre-established friendships – often close friendships – in that field and it is also probable that such close friendships will shape the researcher’s work and influence their positioning within the field. (Taylor 2011, 8)

The issue of friendship existing in the informant-researcher relationship or arising during fieldwork should also be considered in the context of professional motivation, power imbalance, cultural differences, inequalities in purpose, and potential gain.

The relational space between participant and researcher is the site of disclosure of the researcher’s methodological approaches, tactics, and concerns, which translates into a greater focus on the value of enhanced dialogue between the researcher and researched person. The question thus arises as to what methods allow us to have an insight into the relationship between participants and researcher and encourage a mutual approach (Finlay 2005). At some point in my research, participants had been enlisted as co-researchers, with whom I was engaged in mutual reflection and in a revolving circle of perceiving, interpreting, and reconstructing to understand expressions (Gadamer 2013).

Thus, my fieldwork offers some interesting examples of how this empathic research relationship can develop and, in turn, shape the findings of the research.

#### WOMEN’S ACTIVISM IN SMALL TOWNS IN EAST GERMANY – A SCATTERED FIELD

In the case of research conducted in East Germany, a call to employ empathy in my research brought up little inner resistance in me (Corinna Trogisch), because for researchers socialised as women, the call to behave empathetically is nothing new. It is important to remember that empathy is not just about being nice. Empathy necessitates emotional involvement, and a basic lesson from the sociology of emotion would be that “[p]ositive feelings flow up, and negative feelings flow down the social hierarchy” (Flam 2005, 22).

The research question of my project was derived from my colleague Magda Muszel's initial study on feminist activism in small towns in Poland. Our joint project set out to delve deeper into her initial findings and transfer the framework of the Polish study to the eastern provinces of Germany. A good deal of energy had to be spent on finding interviewees, which already indicates that the location of the study exhibited significant and immediate differences with respect to our initial research questions (derived from the Polish pre-study). I first conducted a pre-talk, consisting of a phone call of roughly 15-minute duration, with the aim of establishing an initial rapport, learning about individual subtopics and calculating the time that might be needed during the recorded interview. Because of the pandemic, some of the interviews were conducted as online meetings.<sup>4</sup> I attempted to achieve two things in each interview, touching on the question of empathy, namely, creating an atmosphere of collaboration and initiating a dialog.

Many women's movements since the late 1960s have a tradition of sharing personal experiences and conditions as a female-identifying person. On the political level, this has been central in constituting collective political subjectivity. Accessing the field constitutes a veritable convention (DeVault and Gross 2006,173). My feminist commitment to and socialization in the culture of the West German women's movement has brought me close to the participants of my research, but here, in the former and actual East, it positions me not quite as an insider but as an allied researcher. Nevertheless, shared taboos and attitudes of what is appropriate may constrain one's behaviour when it comes to uneasy topics (Andersen and Jack 1991, 13). In the case of my actual research, doing a low-paid job in a Women's centre and not feeling valued enough may represent a taboo that I do not explore too deeply.

From here on, I organise my personal reflection along two subjects: (1) empathy, knowledge and status; (2) empathy related to the characteristics of a specific field – in my case, a scattered field in which no overall cause connects the research subjects and many currents of activism are present with little knowledge of each other.

#### EMPATHY, KNOWLEDGE, AND STATUS MATTER

With the historical development of mass education, the possession of a higher degree is more commonplace and often does not mark a delineation between interviewer and interviewee. And today, both also might share the belief that higher education has lost its value (DeVault and Gross 2006). While we want researchers to be empathetic, many of us do research in short-lived projects under difficult circumstances, including

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4 Due to a lack of space, the question of how the digital form influences the expression of empathy and its perception on the other side must be left out here.

problems of access to offices and other facilities. Every researcher is a “familied self” (Ferree 2006, 121), with informal and institutional loyalties, a growing professional experience and, sometimes, resignation. Interviewing and being interviewed is a mentally and emotionally exhausting task. That is why interviewers often keep fruit and chocolate within easy reach, and we may miss offering an expected level of care if we don’t. Sometimes it is me who is provided with chocolate from interviewees. Researchers, as well as the researched are vulnerable and care, in both directions, is necessary (Cotterill 1992; Toombs et al. 2016). On the whole, the picture often presented of a powerful researcher who imposes her or his own perspectives on less powerful research subjects seems to me not quite accurate in these times.

This is intertwined with the question of how much historical and other knowledge enables empathy. We have to be knowledgeable about our interviewees’ world to properly address them and react to their accounts. For example, knowing that a certain region of the former GDR was called *Tal der Ahnungslosen* (the Valley of the Unaware) may be instrumental in understanding allusions and hence, an interview partner’s intent. So, when preparing to interview elderly activists in the eastern provinces, I had to learn about battles won and lost around the time of German reunification, and the ways in which women organised while engaging with their specific understanding of class and political autonomy. Reflecting upon this preparation, I am still unsure how well I have learned my lesson. The advice of a previous project leader comes to mind: “Do not do too much, you are not being paid for it.” Correspondingly, one reason why Muszel’s initial study merits great respect is that it was realized without any budget. What this means in practice is that a lack of funding impacts our ability to act empathically (for an early discussion of this, see Anderson and Jack 1991).

There is a shared understanding between researchers and the subjects of their research as both do underpaid and devalued work. A characteristic of feminist activism is its low prestige and many of my informants are used to having their professionalized work poorly acknowledged, for example, those who keep women’s centres in provincial towns alive despite the constant struggle to acquire secure funding. These interviewees are forgiving if I make a mistake or lack prior knowledge of an issue, and gratefully acknowledge what I know about their conditions. This contrasts sharply with more privileged interviewees (for example, local functionaries) who are more accustomed to acknowledgement for what they do and from my experience are sometimes more critical of my work. One such person had me prepare an exposé before providing me with contacts for potential interlocutors. This is how power relations and status matter within the field.

## EMPATHY RELATED TO THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SPECIFIC FIELD

The degree of care I provide for an interviewee and that I demand of myself also informs the way I perceive someone. Political repression and danger from the far right also play their part. While some interviewees only open up after determining that I have the proper knowledge of the political context to avoid asking about topics which could bring up harm, others, in contrast, push back if they feel I am judging them to be vulnerable and even demand that I use their real names. Here again, the different reactions of my respondents within the scattered field become clear. Under these conditions, a pre-talk before each recorded interview becomes crucial as a low-risk opportunity for both of us to dip our toes into the first waters of emotional involvement, which helps us to fuse horizons during our actual interview.

“Allied” with those in my scattered field, I feel a strong drive to make up for the unpaid time expense my interviewees make. My use of their labour feels burdensome and, in some respects, illegitimate. A scattered field may shed more direct light on the connection between empathy and status matters and may make a reflection inescapable. By comparison, it seems to me that in Poland, the existing strength of the movement in question provides the research with an immediate plausibility and perceptibly “pays off” for the informants even if a researcher takes up their time. As a vibrant women’s movement always implies inter-class alliances, the perception of interviewer and interviewee as “we” (see Magdalena Muszel’s part) levels out status differences. In a review of her initial article from 1981, and leaving the initially favoured concept of friendship behind, Ann Oakley proposes viewing interview data as a “gift” to the researcher by those who are researched, and who have no control over the outcome (Oakley 2016, 208–209). Given the dependency of researchers on their interview partners and their poor status and insufficient funding, “gift” seems an apt word.

The characterization of the field as scattered and short on prestige explains when and how empathy matters during the interviewing process. The political language they use, their bonds within the field, their “emotion” cultures, and the conditions in which they operate are not the same for the 20 plus women I interviewed. No shared cause connects them. Indeed, several of my interview partners did not consider the right to abortion to be acutely under threat – even though there is a paternalistic regulation by the state, and an existing threat as defined in the penal code.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, these participants form part of a body called “the women’s movement” in the eastern provinces of Germany. So far, my empathetic interactions with my research participants

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5 A new regulation from 2022, which came into effect during my research, holds German state organs back from classifying information on abortion on doctors’ websites as (illegal) “advertisement for abortion”. Besides, the matter of ‘advertisement for abortion’ is still prohibited by the penal code and thus criminalized.

convinced me that the hardest task for any researcher is to understand the field rather than to comprehend the activists as individuals. In the course of my research, I became somebody who shared knowledge about this specific, melted-in, partly renovated and partly devastated field.

#### ANTI-COVID ACTIVISTS – RESEARCHING AN “UNLOVED GROUP”

Field access proves to be particularly challenging when researchers and research subjects are separated, for example, by their sociocultural or political-ideological background. This is especially true for groups that are strongly stigmatised in public discourse and are therefore distant, if not hostile, to representatives of the state and thus also to “mainstream” scientists (Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 248).<sup>6</sup> In this respect, it was not surprising that dozens of emails, phone calls, and Facebook messages went unanswered for weeks when I (Piotr Kocyba) tried to establish contact with Polish Anti-Covid activists. A single positive response to my request came from someone who requested the presence of national media and the movement’s own “experts” to be a prerequisite for an interview, which indicates that the role of science is being reduced here to a mere amplification function.

In addition, the timing of the research exacerbated the difficulty in establishing contact. The fieldwork began in early 2021 during a Coronavirus wave when lockdowns were still partially imposed. Both of these factors are of particular importance because the research was conducted among groups with which I had no previously established contacts. Without having met in person at gatherings or protests, establishing initial contact via online methods must have seemed suspicious – even if, for example, the organisers of Black Lives Matter protests invited for interviews at the same time and under the same pandemic conditions were more open to inquiries coming from scientists.<sup>7</sup> A comparison of these simultaneously conducted projects may indicate that the establishment of personal trust is of particular importance for groups stigmatised by the (scientific) mainstream.

An exception to this rule has made the breakthrough here. By calling an “emergency” cell phone number of an association offering help to people “harassed” by the “corona-state”, I managed to recruit an activist who later acted as a gatekeeper. This interviewee was, in fact, not a regular member of any official association but a supporter of many initiatives, some new, most not yet institutionalised. Because of his

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6 “Mainstream” scientists because the anti-vax movement, which dominated the Anti-Covid protests in Poland, relies on a whole range of physicians or other “experts” supporting their claims.

7 Piotr Kocyba was simultaneously involved in a comparative project on BLM-protests in Europe. See Milman et al. 2021.

dense network, the interviewee was able to help recruit other individuals. Despite his assistance, I was still confronted with the suspicion toward researchers common among Anti-Covid activists. In most cases, I was required to answer an entire list of questions about the intent of the research project, its funding, and the nature of the research questions, beforehand – sometimes in a written form.

#### TRUST AND EMPATHY WITH AN “UNLOVED GROUP”

Even if contact was successfully established and an interview arranged, distrust continued to be an issue. In an effort to dissipate it, I emphasised that the research was not directed against Anti-Covid activists and that I would not use the results against them. But, highlighting the general ethical principle of not harming the researched was still not enough in this case.<sup>8</sup> Building trust thus required me to openly address the risk that the knowledge generated by the interviews could harm the anti-lockdown protest movement. In this vein, I openly admitted that the empirical material obtained could play a role in the stigmatising discourse (similar to Hollan 2008, 481), even though my intention was not politically motivated but was, instead, to enhance understanding. Thus, while I revealed my genuine interest and harmless intentions, I did not pretend to have total control over the effects of the empirical material. This sensitive procedure carries an empathetic gesture by declaring understanding and recognizing that my interviewees’ activism could have negative effects including social costs. My interviewees referred to broken friendships, family frictions, and problems with employers or state representatives (such as the police, the public prosecutor’s office, or the tax authorities). The reasons for these conflicts ranged from fundamental disagreements about the danger of the virus or vaccination to legal disputes about the (violation of) COVID-19 measures. At the same time, in the perception of the Anti-Covid activists I interviewed, the criticism from the opposing side was coupled with moral judgments about their supposed abnormality or irrationality – a hurtful accusation.

My second approach in endeavouring to gain trust was that after extensive research preparing the interviews, I noticed that despite their high number, Polish Anti-Covid protests had received much less media coverage than, for example, their German counterparts (Kocyba 2021). I shared this observation with my interviewees and felt this struck a chord with them whenever I mentioned it. They all ‘suffered’ from the feeling that they were being given no or paltry attention despite their constant (often privately funded) commitment. This demonstrated to them that I could understand

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8 Some scholars conduct research on the far right with the aim not only to understand, but to use the knowledge to “prevent and deter right-wing extremism” (Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 250). Blee speaks of the “presumption of net benefit” (Blee 2018b, 94–96).

their negative feelings of marginalisation. I also promised them that at least the academic public would be the recipients of my research. Accordingly, many agreed to an interview believing that they could tell their version of their story, so that it will transcend history.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, I explained that it was plausible to assume that my findings would impact public debate. In this regard, I referred to the example of the Independence March. Here, a protest survey I conducted in 2018 showed that the largest event of its kind (on the 100th anniversary of independence) mobilised mostly not radical right-wing subcultures but a well-educated and better-off population.<sup>10</sup> Against the backdrop of heated debate over whether the independence marches were gatherings of “fascists” or “normal” patriots (Kocyba and Łukianow 2020), my results were received favourably in right-wing media.<sup>11</sup> Thus, I was able to demonstrate that I did not intend to conduct research against groups stigmatised by the public, but that my research could spark interest in them, and – most importantly – that I was aware of the marginalised situation of Anti-Covid activists.<sup>12</sup>

#### DISTANCE AND ITS SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Although my interlocutors consented to giving interviews, it was rarely possible to gain satisfactory empirical data. The heated atmosphere around the Anti-Covid protests had an obvious impact on our conversations. In one case, this manifested itself in an interviewee expressing his distance through a lack of communication. It was here that I reached the limits of what is doable in such a situation (Hollan 2008, 488); namely, it became clear that empathy, because of the dialogical moment inscribed in it, must be brought to the interaction not only by the researcher but also by the researched.

9 Alongside qualitative interviews, I used established contacts to conduct a qualitative protest survey study. Before the event began, the organiser explicitly called on participants to take the questionnaires, fill them out, and send them back in to leave some trace in history. This resulted in an astonishingly high rate of cooperation (83 per cent of the more than 500 approached protesters accepted a questionnaire). In contrast to this experience, in more than 20 of my surveys of both right-wing and left-wing protests, my request to the protest organizers to ‘advertise’ my survey was not followed up.

10 Marsz Niepodległości 2018 – wstępne wyniki. <https://demonstracjepl.wordpress.com/2019/11/14/marsz-niepodleglosci-2018-wstepne-wyniki/> (accessed 08.01.2022).

11 To give just one example, see: Facts from Poland. 2019: Chavs and hooligans, or maybe educated and well-off? Who are the participants of the Independence March? <https://wpolityce.pl/facts-from-poland/473382-who-are-the-participants-of-the-independence-march> (accessed 08.01.2022).

12 This was not tactical sympathy in order to gain access to the field (Hervik 2021, 100–103). My concern about the potential consequences of my research was sincere. This stance, in turn, sometimes leads to difficult questions in dealing with the interview material or to my colleagues’ criticism of my work as being too understanding.

The rest of my interviewees seemed open, but most often I abstained from inquiring about sensitive issues (such as conspiracy narratives). I felt that the trust which had been established was fragile enough to make the interviewees close off quickly if they were pressed too hard. Here, my aim was an honest “appreciation of what is ‘sensitive’ to members” of the anti-lockdown movement (Fielding 1993, 150).

One exception to this was one anti-vaccine organiser, I could “openly” talk to about “sensitive” topics and address statements I found incomprehensible or unconvincing. Thus, Blee’s (2002, 11) strategy of irritation was only applicable here, for example, when asking about protesters dressed as concentration camp inmates. At first glance, sympathy may play a larger role than is assumed in the research literature and indeed postulated in this paper, because the personal component seemed to be the decisive factor here. The mutual sympathy between the interviewee and myself during the interview felt like the key to addressing critical topics. One of the reasons for this was the common life situation we found ourselves in (such as similar experiences with small children during the lockdowns). But there was more to this openness. In the end, it was my interviewee’s ability to appreciate my willingness and interest in her motives and the reasons behind them. She gave me the opportunity to better understand her world and my “outsider” status was not a reason for her to withdraw and exclude me, but rather encouraged her to “be affected by my curiosity”. This illustrates the importance of what Hollan sees as the capacity of our research subjects for empathy.

It can be concluded that in the context of such closed groups with little common ground, mutual empathy is of utter importance. Furthermore, taking into account that a dialogical “empathic understanding unfolds over time” (Hollan 2008, 476), a longer interpersonal exchange seems to be necessary for sufficient trust-building to take place. Consequently, researching “unloved groups” seems more difficult within the underfunded science system since “painstaking engagement on a day-to-day basis in events and routines” (ibid., 481) is a question of resources that need to be invested into the research process – a research process that takes longer and thus becomes more “expensive” the greater the distance to the researched is. This seems to be especially true when it comes to stigmatised groups with whom we do not share our daily lives (contrary to, for instance, Magdalena Muszel’s shared activism with the Polish feminist movement).

## CONCLUSION

Our three examples show different research situations, each with its own implications for field access and interviews. The first case involved a unified field and an insider researcher, the second a scattered one and an allied researcher, whilst the third consisted of a united and closed field with an outsider researcher. The easiest access to the field was found with the Polish female activists. As a recognized member of the movement, the



researcher was faced with a field that embraced her, while remaining closed to outside actors because of accusations of (negatively connoted) feminism; it was open to her as insider. Arranged interviews did not require any additional incentives to take place. Research involving the German women activists proved more difficult. They were not united by an external threat, and due to the isolated nature of the activism of many participants, it was sometimes difficult to win them over to participate in interviews. A collaborative atmosphere and empathic process between researcher and participant was more difficult to achieve, as an overall sense of commonality was absent. The third case was the most challenging. Due to the pandemic measures (including the pressure to get vaccinated), the Anti-Covid activists are highly united. Furthermore, they face extensive stigmatisation (sometimes bordering on vilification), thus they are initially less accessible to researchers whom they perceive as enemies or representatives of the “system”. Therefore, building bridges of empathy is crucial in this case. This can be achieved by first emphasising that the research is (of course) not directed against the activists, but even offers the chance to relate the concerns of Anti-Covid activists back to the scientific (or even public) debate. A paradox presents itself here because research on Anti-Covid activists – unlike feminist studies, for example – does not see itself as advocacy research and there are dangers involved in amplifying their cause. Nevertheless, it was often the acknowledgement of the activists’ marginalised position, a caring attitude, and a promise of not producing potentially harmful research results that were key to obtaining an interview. What appears self-evident in researching groups from the margins of society takes on a new meaning in the context of Anti-Covid activists: practice empathy without advocacy.

The researcher’s closeness to or distance from the three studied groups had different consequences for the conducting of the interviews and the role that empathy takes in them. Again, information flowed easiest in the first case because empathy and common understanding were mutually taken for granted. On closer examination, however, even here a dialogical exchange is of central importance. Depending on the apparent standing of the researcher and the researched, statements are made that presuppose an agreement that does not have to be taken for granted in this way. Therefore, the (alleged) concurrency of the two inner worlds of the researcher and the activist, assumed by the researched, requires an intensive dialogue. In research conducted among feminist activists in small towns of the Eastern German provinces, precarious work relations, low funding, and a lack of interconnectedness on the part of the interviewees add to the half-close, half-distant position of the ‘allied researcher’ and complicates the evolving research relations. A feminist commitment and an empathic approach leads the researcher to ponder how to do justice to the unpaid, unvalued labour that some research subjects perform during and outside of interviews. In the face of a movement standstill, grasping the characteristics of the Eastern German field via intense interaction helps to achieve valid research results. Again, the most challenging situation presented

itself during the study among the anti-Covid activists. Whether an interview succeeds or not (for example when sensitive topics are avoided for the sake of the interviewee) depends on empathy, which also has to be present on the side of the interviewee. It is therefore important in a hostile field that there is a reciprocal acknowledgement of divergent attitudes and mutual curiosity concerning one's counterpart's interpretation of the world. Furthermore, due to the deep polarisation that the Anti-Covid protests exemplify, a more intensive, longer-term engagement with the interviewees is needed. This might provide a better understanding of social practices and their meaning, and a better sense of the socio-political conditions of the activists but also earn researchers the gift of empathy from this "unloved group."

As for empathy, which we have understood as a willingness to be open to someone else's emotions and experiences without re-experiencing them, we can draw one major conclusion. Empathy seems to be problematic, at least in the examples we have presented, especially when dealing with an evolving, yet intense, closeness between the researcher and the researched. Namely, if interviewees assume that there is a 'common knowledge' between them and the researcher, then the latter may have to dialogically dig deeper into this perceived value-congruence. But empathy took on a different role when there was a lack of closeness (which could turn to hostility). In the last case mentioned, the function of empathy was mainly limited to building trust and mutuality. The great distance between the researcher and anti-Covid activists does not imply that attention has to be paid to assumed commonalities. What it does mean, however, is that empathy is a prerequisite for entering dialogue and transforming it into a familiarity between the researcher and the subject, which allows more meaningful insights into the world of the researched. The last example, in particular, shows that in order to achieve satisfactory research results, empathy – as we understand it – must also originate from the researched.

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