The contagion of stigma: the ethics and politics of research with the ‘far right’

Reading the American literature on the extreme Right, it is impossible not to acknowledge the tone of universal disapproval. The conviction prevails that there is something ‘weird’ or ‘alien’ about the extremist. (Fielding, 1981: 15)

Fielding attributes this disapproving tone to lack of sympathy towards members of far right groups rooted in the ‘clash between a positivist and a Verstehen methodology’ (1981: 16). Three decades on, interpretivist approaches are well established in the social sciences and yet the same tone prevails. This suggests that there are more than methodological issues at stake. As Blee (2007: 121) puts it, few academics ‘want to invest the considerable time or to establish the rapport necessary for close-up studies of those they regard as inexplicable and repugnant, in addition to dangerous and difficult’ (my emphasis). The problem is rather one of how to study social movements which are ‘distasteful’, that is ‘those individuals and groups with whom the researcher shares neither political orientation nor way of life and whose politics and/or way of life are found objectionable’ (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992: 217). Of course such movements are not only of the far right; substance users, sex workers or criminal gangs might be included among those with a distasteful ‘way of life’. However, while there is an extensive literature on the latter, sustained engagement with far right activists for the purposes of academic study remains rare (exceptions include: Billig, 1978; Fielding, 1981; Ezekiel, 1995, 2002; Blee, 2002; Simi and Futrell, 2010; Pilkington, Omel’chenko and Garifzianova, 2010; di Nunzio and Toscano, 2014).

One way of managing close-up research with distasteful groups has been for researchers to distance themselves from those researched either through the adoption of theoretical frameworks that pathologise those studied or of research techniques – through the use of autobiographies, self-complete questionnaires or analysis of secondary material – that keep researchers’ hands clean (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992: 218). In studies of the far right this has been accomplished most recently through studies of how such groups use the Internet and digital media to recruit followers and disseminate ideas (see Back, Keith and Solomos, 1998; Atton, 2006; Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011; Jackson and Gable, 2011; Simpson and
Such studies allow covert research and thus minimise the ‘contagion of stigma’ (Kirby and Corzine, 1981) through personal contact.

In this chapter I make a case for conducting ‘close up’ research with groups perceived as far right notwithstanding the difficulties that this presents to both researchers and audiences. The argument has three components. First, there is no methodological obstacle to such research; the experience of access, formation and management of relations with respondents in this study demonstrates that it is possible to develop the quality of relations necessary to do meaningful ethnographic research with distasteful groups. Second, to generate such relations does not require unacceptable epistemological (claiming an ‘objective’ position) or ethical (feigning sympathy) compromise. Respondents accept that research can be undertaken in the interests of understanding how they make sense of the world regardless of the researcher’s own political alignment. Sustained engagement is the crucial factor here; it generates confidence from both sides and renders the relationships increasingly able to withstand challenge and debate. Finally, if the first two contentions are confirmed, then what constrains us is not a lack of fit between the values of researchers and researched but an institutionalised distaste for close-up research with the far right. This is compounded by pressure to forefront, and make explicit, political intention in research practice in a way that threatens to place subjects with whose political views we do not agree ‘out of bounds’ (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992: 15). The ‘contagion of stigma’ – whereby moral condemnation is attached to the research or researchers through a process of ‘guilt by association’ (1992: 4) – constrains the space for ethnographic research with far right groups and thus, it is argued here, our knowledge, understanding and capacity for changing the social world.

Listening to the EDL: collecting and analysing data

‘Close up’ research for this study was conducted over more than three years (April 2012–July 2015). Observation was carried out during participation in a range of EDL events: demonstrations, divisional meetings, informal social occasions and the Crown Court trial of two respondents (see Appendix 1 for details). Notes from observations and interviews together with summaries of any particular events or significant informal communication between events were recorded in a field diary. This field diary – 136,000 words long and divided into 65 individual diary entries – was anonymised before being coded alongside interview transcripts.

A total of twenty demonstrations were attended of which fourteen were national demonstrations,¹ two were local and four were ‘flash’ demonstrations. National demonstrations were viewed by many respondents as ‘a good day out’ and travel to and from them, usually by hired coach, afforded the opportunity to observe social interactions as well as a wide range of cultural practices (around alcohol, drugs, food and money) and to chat about everyday life. Time spent in the pub designated for EDL demonstrators to gather prior to the march allowed me to experience the ‘build-up’ to the demonstration and some of its affective dimension described in Chapter 7. Local demonstrations were rarely attended by
respondents (outside their own area), although the documentary film Loud and proud: listening to the EDL made as part of the study was filmed primarily at one such event. ‘Flash’ demonstrations were relatively infrequent and, since they were not pre-arranged with the police, communication about them was exclusively by mobile phone; venue and time were disseminated usually only hours in advance. The leaking of information, or an unpredicted change of circumstances, meant that, on two occasions, the planned ‘flash’ did not go ahead. Some key informants did not attend flash demonstrations on principle because they disapproved of this kind of ‘direct action’, although all the flash events at which I was present were non-violent.

Divisional meetings were infrequent, partially due to the temporary loss of an ‘HQ’ where the meetings could be held. HQs were pubs where sympathetic owners allowed the EDL to use the function room for the meeting. HQs were also used as meeting points before or after demonstrations; in some cases the pub would open especially for the EDL (including outside normal licensing hours). Because of this, and in order to protect the owners of the pub from threats or aggression from opposition movements, members were warned not to use the name of the pub in communications. Divisional meetings were not only infrequent but often insubstantial. However, they did allow an opportunity to meet and chat to people in-between demonstrations and to arrange interviews. Towards the end of the research, more substantial regional ‘meet and greet’ events were attended as well as a planning meeting between EDL leaders and police contacts ahead of a national demonstration. Observation was also carried out over four days of the Crown Court trial of two EDL members prosecuted for ‘violent disorder’ at an EDL demonstration. I was present also at a number of EDL social occasions and met individual respondents socially in their homes or in pubs especially during a lengthy period of withdrawing from the field.

Individuals were approached for interview either following contact with them at demonstrations or after an initial approach by a key informant. A total of thirty-one interviews – twenty-six audio, five video – were conducted in a range of venues, including: respondents’ homes; the divisional ‘HQ’ or other pub; fast-food restaurants and supermarket cafes; and a public park. The interviews were conducted as conversations and thus varied significantly, although the employment of a common interview scenario ensured the inclusion, at some point in the conversation, of questions relating to six broad themes. These were: how the respondent became involved, and how they now participated, in the movement; views on the EDL as an organisation (structure, ideology); experiences of participation and activism; the role of activism in wider life; sources and transmission of political values (family, peers, inspirational figures); and views on wider society and the political system. Interviews lasted, on average, just over 90 minutes and both audio and video interviews were recorded and transcribed.

This study was designed as a classic face-to-face ethnography. However, online spaces were incorporated into the study as another site of everyday practice, communication, self-presentation and bonding of respondents (Hallet and
Virtual spaces of EDL interaction were engaged with for communication and observation purposes only. Thus, I responded positively to ‘friend requests’ (if the person was known to me or verified by key informants) and communicated with individuals via private ‘inbox’ messages. I never posted to EDL divisional or members’ personal pages (or even to my own personal page) and never engaged in discussion in these shared spaces. I accepted no non-EDL friend requests to the page in order to draw clear online boundaries between personal and professional life but also to ensure the anonymity of respondents, agreed as part of the informed-consent process. Accepting and making ‘friend’ requests allowed respondents to see with whom I was already in contact and thus build trust and openness.

Newsfeeds from ‘friends’ generated important contextual information about current issues of concern as well as changes in ‘status’ and personal events in respondents’ lives. This was an important mechanism for keeping in touch between physical meetings and provided insight into the creation of community through the sharing of materials, responses to them and support of those experiencing difficulties. The systematic analysis of the huge amount of text and images generated from these virtual spaces is beyond the scope of this book. Of particular interest for future study might be the ‘call and response’ mode of much online engagement that often ratchets up tension not only between EDL supporters and ‘trolls’ but also between EDL activists. The petty but divisive squabbles generated in online spaces would simply have got ‘sorted’ had the contact been face to face (see Chapter 2).

A total of 593 still photos and 130 video clips were taken during the research and some of this visual data was included in documentary film or in the data set for analysis. Images in this book were taken by the author unless otherwise stated. Photos and video links were provided also by respondents. Other textual materials gathered included: leaflets produced by local EDL divisions; police flyers detailing demonstration regulations; flyers produced by counter-demonstrators; and a large number of media (mainstream and EDL oppositional) reports and posts on EDL-related issues.

Interviews and diary entries were transcribed and anonymised so that all key respondents (thirty-nine in total) were referred to by assigned pseudonyms (used throughout this book), while the names of any other group members or family and friends mentioned by respondents were removed. References to place names (including names of schools, pubs, districts) that might make an individual identifiable were also deleted. The only real names given are for individuals in the movement who held openly public positions, that is, the leadership and inner circle who appeared with their real names (or own chosen names) on the website and at demonstrations. In cases where individuals were encountered (and assigned pseudonyms) as respondents but later became public figures within the movement, they are referred to by pseudonym in relation to information provided in their capacity as informant while material taken from the Internet or speeches at demonstrations, where they appeared as public figures, is referenced using their real names.
Data were analysed using Nvivo 9.2 software following a set of common principles designed for the larger MYPLACE project (Pilkington, forthcoming). This involved the use, initially, of a two-level thematic coding strategy: data were coded to over a thousand Level 1 (child) nodes grouped under thirty-eight Level 2 (parent) nodes. A number of theoretically informed ‘themes’ were generated following this initial coding and these ‘themes’ or ‘metaphors’ structure the empirical analyses underpinning Chapters 2–8 of this book.

**Making friends with the EDL (and other unspeakable acts): access, trust and relationships in contentious research**

On 1 September 2012, the EDL conducted a legally sanctioned demonstration in Walthamstow, East London. It was roundly declared by demonstrators to be ‘the worst demo ever’. As they marched they were on the receiving end of a barrage of eggs thrown by counter-demonstrators who also occupied the designated space for speeches by EDL leaders, thereby preventing them from taking place. EDL supporters were kept within a tight police containment cordon from approximately 12.30 p.m. to 10 p.m. on a hot day without access to toilets, water or food. As night fell, they were arrested two-by-two under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act (breach of peace), regardless of whether individuals had participated in any public order offence.4 Walthamstow was just the third demonstration I had travelled to with the EDL. It was my first weekend off intensive radiotherapy treatment and it proved to be a long and tough day. Its final stages are described in this excerpt from a much longer diary entry (see Box 1).

I start with this diary excerpt not because being designated ‘one of the boys’ is a badge of honour or marker of the acquisition of the trust needed to undertake ethnographic research. As discussed below, being ‘accepted’ by research subjects when those subjects are ‘distasteful’ is accompanied more often by a sense of guilt than of professional achievement. The story starts here because it captures the moment when the research became ethnographic. Ethnography demands neither sympathy nor empathy with those being researched, but it cannot be conducted without emotional engagement. Sharing feelings of nervousness and frustration, expressing anger and relief and experiencing the ‘affect’ of collective arrest signalled the start of the ethnographic process.

**Access: time tells**

Research with the far right, it is claimed, is fraught with difficulties of ‘access’, ‘hostility’ and mutual ‘fear’; groups tend to regard academics as untrustworthy or hostile and seek to prevent entry to their groups or access to members (Blee, 2002: 14–17). In this research, access proved less problematic than anticipated. Approval by a Regional and a Division Level Organiser – both of whom were prepared to ‘vouch for’ me – generated wider acceptance. Of course the ‘far right’ covers a wide spectrum and the relative lack of hostility encountered in this case.
Box 1: Feeling the affect ... Walthamstow, 1 September 2012

We are being processed very slowly still. Eventually – sometime after 9 p.m. – they open up a second exit point to process from and things speed up. When we finally get to the front of the queue there are no women police officers so we wait while about 20 blokes go ahead of us. We say we don’t mind being searched by a male officer but we are told that would be ‘wrong’. I point out it would be less a violation of rights than that endured over the last few hours. The police officer smiles wryly. About 9.30 p.m. we are finally ‘processed’. The police officer tries to engage me in the eye and read me my rights. I am furious. An irrational response – the officer is just doing her job – but it positions me as somebody who has done something criminal and I resent that. I reach into my bag – I want to show her the project information sheet so she knows that I am there as an observer – and she clearly interprets this as a move to get some weapon and she starts to pull at my hands. Two male officers immediately move in and grab my arm. My anger and sense of injustice is rising and I start to understand why so many people are charged with resisting arrest. … I manage to contain the anger and explain the research story. The woman officer offers to give me a copy of the arrest note and the name of the commander in charge to make a formal complaint. I am then told I need to get on the bus … We will have to get the train back. … The journey to Victoria seems to take forever. … Eventually we are let off. It is almost 10 p.m. We have been without access to food, water and toilets now for nine and a half hours. … Once on the train we buy a couple of half bottles of wine from the buffet car and sit together and begin to laugh about the day. This has a strong bonding effect. We discuss the rights and wrongs of leaving Richard, [names other EDL member] and Rachel; they had asked us to wait and go with them on a train at 1 a.m. [because it would be cheaper] … The four of us have family to get back to though and we show each other photos of our kids on our phones. I remember that Jack always takes a present back for his daughter. … He hasn’t managed to this time … When they get off at [names neighbouring city], Jack gives me a big hug and says ‘You’re one of the boys now’. (Field diary, 1 September 2012)

may say more about the EDL as a movement than about my research practice. Moreover, openness and lack of hostility are not necessarily benign; motivations for participation may be instrumental (see below).

My access to the field was facilitated by the personal contacts of another researcher through whom an initial meeting with a potential gatekeeper was arranged and who attended some observed events and interviews (April–July 2012). The first meeting with the gatekeeper was approved by her Regional Organiser (RO), after which we were invited to attend demonstrations and local division meetings. Thus, reflecting the flat structure of the organisation and relative autonomy of divisions (see Chapter 2), there was no formal process of authorisation of the research at national level. The flip side of this was that access
was not a single moment but required repeated negotiation and affirmation. The original gatekeeper, who had promised to ensure introductions to relevant people at the first demonstration, did not attend the demo and, soon afterwards, ‘stepped back’ from the movement altogether. This had consequences. Without the anticipated introductions, some supporters on the coach raised concerns with a Divisional Organiser about the presence of ‘reporters’ taking photos. The situation was defused by sitting down with the divisional leader and showing him the photos taken; the word then went around that the material being collected was not harmful (field diary, 14 July 2012).

Members of stigmatised groups show a heightened sensitivity to any potential threat to the group and often react protectively when asked to participate in research (Crowley, 2007: 607). The fear that research might lead to the public denigration of the group can lead potential respondents to subject the researcher to extensive checking out to ascertain whether he or she might be open (or hostile) to their cause before agreeing to (or rejecting) the request to participate (2007). While I have no doubt that respondents routinely ‘googled’ me, this verification process in my case was non-threatening and often good-humoured. At one divisional meeting, I was, unexpectedly, asked to explain plans to make a video documentary at a local demo. Introducing me to the group, the Divisional Organisers joked that they had checked me out and that I was ‘not UAF’ (Unite Against Fascism) (field diary, 19 October 2012). Indeed, this was a practice that I encouraged. I opened a Facebook account in my real name and with a genuine profile and when inviting people to be interviewed I suggested they talk first to their Divisional Organisers or any common Facebook friends. This followed the internal group practice of ‘vouching’ for people. On only one occasion was there any covert attempt to check me out. This followed a conversation with a group of youth division members from another city whilst attending the EDL/NWI Manchester demonstration. We swopped phone numbers and subsequently agreed to meet up in their home city for an interview. On the night before the scheduled interview, I received a text from one of the group saying he had been told by other members not to talk to me because ‘It safety as we had many do before and turned out UAF’ (field diary, 8 March 2013). A little later I received a call to my mobile phone from a woman asking if I wrote books; clearly some kind of ‘test’. Logging on to Facebook, I saw a local youth division leader, Connor, had intervened and posted a message saying, ‘The [names city] youth who are meeting that women tomorrow … she’s doing research on why EDL youth want to get involved within things like the EDL’ followed by a series of posts in which Connor and Chris stated that they had been ‘working with her … for the last year’ and confirming ‘she’s no informer or nuffin trust lads’ (Facebook communication recorded in field diary, 8 March 2013).

The interview did not happen but I learned from the process that the most crucial aspect of gaining and maintaining trust was simply time. The longer I was around, and had not, as some feared, exposed individuals or the movement to the media, the more people trusted that this was not my agenda. Thus, by the time I arranged to interview a local RO in October 2013, he laughed that he had not
needed to ask permission from national leadership to talk to me since I had ‘been
to fucking more demos than most fucking members I got’ (Ed).

Consent: what am I agreeing to?

This research was conducted overtly. I introduced myself to people as a researcher
interested in understanding why people became involved with the EDL as part of
a wider project about youth activism in Europe. I made it clear that I was not a
journalist and sought a sustained engagement with the group in order to under-
stand grassroots members’ perspectives. Of course this raises myriad questions
about honesty, instrumentality, positionality and politics, which are discussed
below. But there are also practical challenges to sustaining a completely overt
stance. The ‘mass’ nature of some observed events meant that not all individuals,
for example members of other divisions encountered at demonstrations, were
aware of my status. These situations were handled on a case-by-case basis guided
by a principle of not lying. I never used a cover story or pretended to be a member
of the EDL and I did not elicit information from demonstrators if they did not
know I was a researcher. If the conversation was sustained, I looked for a natural
opportunity to explain my own reason for being at the demonstration. Sometimes
this elicited interest and dialogue; in other cases it closed down the discussion
(field diary, 2 March 2013).

Such situations demonstrate the inadequacy of formal ethical procedures for
ensuring informed consent in ethnographic research. In this study, an informa-
tion sheet and written consent form were used with all respondents engaging in inter-
views. In no case did a respondent refuse the request to sign a consent form and,
since the researcher was well known to them, they were able to raise additional
questions and concerns afterwards (via Facebook or text messages). However,
while signed consent forms provide an institution-friendly paper trail, they are
of little help in the day-to-day business of ethnography for either researchers or
respondents. They work on the principle that they empower respondents to act in
their own best interest and presume that this will be dictated by rational desires
to minimise harm to themselves from engagement with the research. However,
this is not always the case. When respondents were asked if they consented to
photographs of them being used and, if so, whether they should be pixelated prior
to use, for example, they responded in almost all cases with bravado. A typical
comment was that since their faces were already all over the Internet as a result of
police, media and other video footage taken at demonstrations, they had ‘nothing
to lose’. In other cases, ‘being seen’ constituted part of the cause (see Chapter 8).
This issue was of particular concern in relation to younger respondents. Connor,
for example resisted assurances about anonymisation, saying that he wanted the
name of the youth division he ran to feature prominently in whatever I wrote. He
also insisted, as a matter of principle, that any photos or videos used should not
pixelate his face; ‘I don’t want my identity changed’ (field diary, 18 July 2012). In
this situation, I found myself urging him to think not only about the present but
also the future and the possibility that he might regret the notoriety he sought
now. Another respondent, after reading an excerpt from the manuscript, asked for his real name rather than the assigned pseudonym to be used; I replaced the pseudonym with a name with which the respondent was more comfortable.

Formal ethical rules are crude instruments in the navigation of the ‘grey areas’ of research. Anonymity was formally assured but practically pointless if individuals agreed to give video interviews for the documentary film. Not revealing the locations of divisions and regional organisations to which members belonged is academic when cited interview material contains distinctive regional speech patterns. Moreover, consent forms are signed usually when respondents conduct their first interview while sustained engagement with respondents blurs the sense of what is being consented to. Outside of the interview situation (on the coach, in the pub, through Facebook) I was privy to personal and non-EDL-related information and could never be sure that respondents understood that personal stories and ‘whole lives’, as well as movement-related issues, would be treated as ethnographic ‘data’. Thus, when anonymising the field diary and interviews, I highlighted text I felt should not be cited without re-contacting the respondent and the personal stories included in Chapter 3, as vignettes were given to individuals to check before inclusion. The fact that in one case this led to the exclusion of the vignette, confirms that consent requires an ongoing process of discussion, reflection and renegotiation of trust throughout the research (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002: 111).

Mutual manipulation? Rapport, trust and friendship in a research context

Smyth and Mitchell (2008: 442) argue that there is an erroneous assumption that ‘rapport’ between researcher and research subjects is essential for successful qualitative social research because it maximises respondent disclosure and enhances understanding. Based on their own work with groups with whom they feel no empathy (anti-abortion activists and conservative evangelicals), they argue that rapport is not inherently positive either epistemologically (understanding is not a consequence of empathy) or ethically (rapport can lead to the exploitation of research subjects). While I would agree with the epistemological argument that understanding is often facilitated best by challenging and interrogating, the notion of rapport provides too limited, and utilitarian, a description of a research relationship which, at least in the case of ethnographic research, is rooted in a range of emotional and sensory experiences that generate affective bonds regardless of whether the researcher shares beliefs, values or behaviours with respondents. The very notion that rapport can be constructed in order to generate trust and encourage disclosure is not only instrumental, it is also transparent to the interlocutor who is a knowing subject, and, especially in the case of stigmatised groups, alert to the possibility that this is the motivation of any apparently interested outsider. Moreover, in establishing a relationship with people to whom one does not feel akin, the usual rapport-building techniques of demonstrating appreciation of respondents’ viewpoints are not available to the researcher since they
seek to avoid the impression that they agree with those views (Team Members, 2006: 63).

In this context, trust and camaraderie emerges not from consciously generated rapport but everyday moments of mutual support, concern, attention and care. When I nearly faint on the overcrowded tube as we travel to the Walthamstow muster point, Jack catches me before I fall and finds me a place to stand nearer the police-guarded door where there is at least a hint of air. When I am travelling abroad and money for the coach has to be paid for the next demo, (unemployed) Kurt simply pays for me too (field diary, 10 May 2014). When I was subjected to verbal abuse by someone from another division for filming an incident with a counter-demonstrator at the Norwich demonstration, Rachel and Lisa tell the guy to back off (field diary, 10 November 2012). When Jack, at the start of his trial, has to make an important decision about his plea, I sit with him as his counsel explains the options and he works through the implications. These incidents – which litter the research diary – may be banal and unreflected, but they are the substance of social relationships and it is the entering into social relationships with those we want to understand that underpins the ethnographic method.

Is this friendship? Or faking it? Duncombe and Jessop (2002: 118–19) argue that by ‘doing rapport’ researchers create ‘faked friendship’ which may be subsequently exposed when respondents read the relationship as one of friendship while researchers view it as ‘doing their job’. This they suggest might even call into question the ethics of such research since consciously fostered rapport might result in respondents disclosing incidents and emotions of a very personal nature that they had not anticipated when they gave ‘informed consent’.

While this is not the place for a detailed discussion of the meaning of friendship per se, it seems unhelpful to talk of real and staged friendship. All social relationships have elements of front and back stage (Goffman, 1990: 32). In the case of relationships generated through close-up research, the bonds are first and foremost situational. But so too are workplace friendships or those with parents of our children’s friends. As I started preparing to exit the field – a process which lasted more than 18 months – I found myself saying that I would ‘keep in touch with those who are my friends’, while struggling myself to know what friendship meant in this context (field diary, 18 May 2013), and have remained in social contact with a few respondents. Perhaps it is more helpful, therefore, to think about relationships not as either real or fake but as on a continuum where some have the potential to continue beyond the situation.

Entering into close social relationships with research respondents necessarily entails ethical challenges and risks. The most common criticism faced by researchers studying stigmatised groups is that, consciously or unconsciously, they become a legitimising mouthpiece for the organisation or cause being researched. This concern is rooted in a questioning of the reasons why activists may want to participate in social research; for stigmatised groups, being the subject of a ‘scientific’ study may provide visibility and possible legitimation, especially if the researcher is thought to be ‘empathetic’ (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992: 229–30). In this study of the EDL it is true that, in the context of a belief that it is almost impossible to
get even factual coverage of the organisation in the media (see Chapter 2), I was seen as a potential alternative channel for ‘telling it as it is’. Discussing the police kettling at the Walthamstow demonstration, for example, one young respondent commented, ‘that’s what we need. More people like you in there, like inside’ (Jason). Such suggestions that I might be used as a counterbalance to the negative coverage the EDL received in the media, however, were often rejected by close respondents before I could answer for myself. Highly aware of the stigma attached to the organisation and sensitive to my position, they made it clear to others that I was not there to ‘put our side’. Only on one occasion was I asked to engage in activities – researching a planning application – that would help the EDL. I declined the request (field diary, 12 October 2013).

This does not mean, of course, that a researcher’s presence and interventions are never used for representational purposes. Illustrative here is an incident following a day spent with the EDL’s LGBT division leader (Declan). While the purpose of travelling to the town had been to interview Declan, the day had turned into a series of social occasions and the following day I inboxed Declan to thank him for his time and sent him a group photo I had taken on the seafront. A couple of days later, checking Facebook, I see that he has posted it to his personal Facebook page with the comment “The far left call the EDL “homophobes.” Let’s see now, a married straight woman, a straight teenager and a gay couple holding the EDL flag. Call us homophobes now! ;-)” (field diary, 23 March 2013). The field diary entry captures my concerns and reflections on how my presence in the group produces material and symbolic artefacts which have consequences; in this case this photograph was used to undermine stereotypes of the EDL being anti-gay and I wondered whether I had been naive to send it. However, the posting made no reference to any ‘authority’ lent the representation because the photo had been taken by an outsider, and the image was a genuine representation of the people and their relations to one another as I had encountered them that day. Another potentially difficult moment arose when Jack, who had been charged with ‘violent disorder’ following the EDL national demonstration in Walsall in September 2012, asked me whether I would act as a character witness for him. Having been present throughout the demonstration, physically positioned on the EDL side of the police lines yet not an EDL supporter, potentially lent some authority to any statement I made. I had not seen Jack act violently or encourage others to do so and I could vouch for his peaceful behaviour at demonstrations I had attended with him previously. At the same time, I was conscious that acting on his behalf would draw attention to my presence at a number of events and the fact that I had notes, photos and video from them. If the police had reason to suspect that this material might provide evidence of unlawful action, they would have the right to request I surrender it; this carried implications not only for Jack but others in the movement. We agreed that his solicitor would ring me if he thought that it was still a good idea to ask me to act (field diary, 4 April 2014). The solicitor did not call.

A second criticism of researchers working with stigmatised groups is that they may themselves exploit the stigmatisation to deceive respondents into thinking
the researcher is supportive of their cause in order to fulfil their own research needs. This often capitalises on the will among some groups to believe that, even when the researcher is overt, they may be a potential convert to the cause (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992: 228). For this reason, Blee (2002: 11) states that ‘from the beginning … I explicitly said that my views were quite opposed to theirs, that they should not hope to convert me’. My own approach to this issue – usually encountered when respondents, often jokingly, looked for confirmation that the researcher had some sympathy with the movement before agreeing to be interviewed for example – was rather different. Typically I responded to such challenges by making clear that the EDL was not a movement I would ever join but in a reciprocally light-hearted rather than aggressive or didactic way. I stressed always that my aim was ‘to understand’ rather than represent the movement either in a positive or negative light. This was an honest statement and, in as much as a research relationship can ever be ‘equal’, it established some shared goals to engagement in the research. In order to conduct the research, both researcher and respondents were required to suspend prejudices about the ‘other’: in the case of the researcher the media image of the EDL as ‘racist thugs’; in the case of respondents, the common view within the EDL that universities were ‘training grounds for the UAF’.

Finally, there is a danger that close personal rapport with respondents, especially those experiencing difficult personal situations, can develop into quasi-therapeutic interviews, which may result in respondents disclosing more than they might have chosen to (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002: 111). While this study of EDL activism did not research difficult emotional or relationship experiences specifically, a number of respondents talked about such experiences. The ethical issues arising from this relate primarily to how far these data can or should be used. Recounting very specific personal situations runs the risk also of allowing individuals to be identified and thus the potential for ‘doing harm’ to respondents by using these details in publications is real. On the other hand, the sanitisation of EDL activism by considering it in isolation from the whole lives of activists obscures, or even distorts, its understanding. Thus, as noted above, once people start to talk not as interviewees the question of consent is reopened.

In most cases the discussion of personal issues was reciprocal and commensurate with the relationship with the individual respondent; Kurt and I joked, for example, that coach journeys to national demos – when we often sat together – were more like mutual therapy sessions. On one occasion, however, an interview with a young man I had met only once before revealed a real need for professional help and left me feeling anxious and inadequate (see Box 2).

Blee (2007: 121) argues that the lack of ‘shared values’ between scholars and far right movements means the ‘methodological bridge’ facilitating trust and mutual understanding between researchers and participants is ‘missing’. In this research, in contrast, I felt a genuine sense of shared experience and mutual care and friendship between myself and a number of key informants and I have argued here that it is possible to achieve the quality of relationships necessary to secure understanding. Klandermans and Mayer also conclude from their experience of
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conducting life-history interviews with far right activists that sufficient rapport was achieved to ensure ‘reliable and valid interviews’ (Team Members, 2006: 58). However, I have suggested that to think about ‘rapport’, ‘trust’ and ‘friendship’ as commodities that can be acquired and exchanged during research in order to achieve one’s aims is to misrecognise what underpins ethnographic research. I argue, rather, that an ethnographic approach requires an emotional engagement with respondents that does not simulate friendship but takes a variety of situational forms that may, or may not, transcend the research context.

Positionality: beyond researcher guilt

While the quality of relations necessary for successful research may be possible, some would argue that it is achieved only at a cost to the researcher’s own positionality or ‘speaking position’. Back and Solomos (1993: 195) reflect that their strategic

Box 2: Help? The questions ‘informed consent’ cannot answer

We first went together to pick up his Subutex prescription. Then we sat in McDonalds. … As we sat he talked awkwardly about the EDL stuff. I felt he thought I was testing his knowledge because he was a ‘newbie’. I wasn’t … The conversations around were intruding too much (to one side, a mother telling her kids off and, to the other, a growing party of hyper-demonstrative teenagers). While I felt increasingly uncomfortable, he withdrew into himself and shut it out. And once he had reached that space, he began to talk again about what was really going on for him. … I am not a trained counsellor and his experience is way beyond mine. God knows what damage my responses might do, no matter how well intended. He commented, as we talked, how strange it was that this was the second time he had met me and I probably knew more about him than almost anybody else. … he is clearly ready to talk about some of the really heavy stuff he is dealing with and he needs someone to do that with … So, do I try and help him access that help? Do I walk away and protect myself? And what do I do with all this stuff which is now recorded? Of course all the formal (informed consent) boxes are ticked but it means nothing when you sit and think about this stuff. Of course he is an adult and he has basic access to services (hostel place, income support, the Subutex prescription) but that is never going to get him out from where he is mentally – what he needs is sustained counselling, what he has is a key worker who hasn’t made a scheduled meeting in the last month. I felt really useless … And what do I do with his story? Strip it back to ‘variables’ (no education, unemployed, criminal record, sustained substance abuse issues, failed relationship, victim of domestic abuse, disability issues, own problems with violence …). What do we learn from that? None of them is a causal factor for joining the EDL. But EDL, like his daughter, like the gatekeeper/surrogate mother via whom he got into the EDL, are foci, points of solidity that might just help him pull himself out of the place he is in. What does that make the EDL? (Field diary, 20 November 2012)

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adoption of a ‘value-free’ position (as objective, outside experts) at points in their research compromised their ‘anti-racist’ project. Smyth and Mitchell (2008: 448) talk about the ‘guilt’ experienced as a result of ‘not telling the whole truth’ about their pro-choice views to anti-abortion activists being researched. As explained above, in my research I did not offer up my ‘position’ as a starting point, but when asked about my views I responded. I found that, in a similar but inverse way to that described by Back and Solomos (1993), my ‘speaking position’ shifted over time. As the research progressed, open discussion and challenge became increasingly possible and I came to understand the research as guided not only by an intellectual desire to understand how respondents understood their activism but a political desire to find a language through which to talk about the issues that concerned them. This shifting subject position is reflected in the writing of this book too, as the author’s voice moves from something close to a ‘neutral observer’ in recounting the origins and trajectory of the organisation (Chapter 2), through that of a questioning interlocutor (Chapters 4–6) to a more emotionally (Chapters 3 and 7) and politically (Chapter 8) engaged narrator. Below I explore how I, and respondents, managed this shifting subject position in the course of fieldwork.

‘Typical UAF’

On a long coach journey back from a national demonstration, a conversation started amongst a small group of people about how removed politicians are from ordinary people’s concerns and strayed into a discussion of the Labour Party. One of the group commented that although his parents ‘were Labour’, he would never vote for them now, ‘not since Blair sold out the country’. When, in the course of the ensuing conversation, he challenged me about being a ‘lefty’, I said that I was indeed on the left. The following day, a core respondent, Ian, rang me and warned me to be more careful what I say. After I got off the coach, he said, he had had to defend me from people saying I was UAF because I had told them I voted Labour (field diary, 25 May 2014).

While I took multiple subject positions into the field – gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, educational background and professional identity – the most threatening to the management of relations with respondents was my political position. The solution proposed by some is to simply not disclose one’s own views. Crowley (2007: 619), in her work with Fathers’ Rights activists, refused to answer questions about herself, interpreting them as the ‘highly motivated pursuit of personal information about me as a way of regaining control in the research context’. I both understood such questions and responded to them differently. When, at the end of a long interview, Matt asked me whether I was ‘sympathetic’ to the EDL, for example, his question seemed a legitimate attempt to get a sense of how I might interpret what he had said and what risk there was that it could cause harm to him or the movement. I responded as honestly as I could at that early stage of research. I said I was a Labour voter and would never join the EDL but that the research to date had led me to question whether people in the EDL were as simply ‘racist’ as portrayed in the media (field diary, 19 August 2012). Thus, in contrast to Crowley,
and partially as a way of allowing the renegotiation of consent in the course of the interview (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002: 111), I encouraged respondents to ask questions. At the end of interviews, I asked if they had any questions they wanted to put to me. In response to this invitation, Ollie asked whether I personally identified with any political ideology. I answered that I was not sure if I signed up to any particular ‘ideology’ any more although I had been more involved in political activism when I was younger. When he asked whether that activism had been ‘left wing, or right wing’ I replied that it had been left wing and talked about some of the types of activism in which I had participated.

These exchanges can be unnerving, especially at the start of research, but as relationships with respondents develop, disclosure of difference and the maintenance of outsider status can provide space for the discussion of issues and feelings that respondents might not necessarily share with those on the ‘inside’ (Bucerius, 2013: 715). The next time I saw the respondent who had called me ‘a lefty’ in the incident on the coach described above, for example, he started to tell me animatedly about some research he had been doing on the left’s position on animal rights and halal meat (the issue that had led him into the EDL in the first place). Recognising me as ‘the other’ amongst them thus sometimes opened up rather than closed down space for dialogue. When, during an interview with three youth division members, Chris commented that my audio recorder ‘looks like a UAF tool to me’, Ray responded, ‘It doesn’t bother me. What I would like to do is sit down with them and see their views on why they are against us.’ In this way ‘UAF’ shifted as a signifier for counter-protestors to the researcher and her tools and, in the process, was divested of its threat and became a space for potentially meaningful debate.

Field observer: ‘simples’

In November 2013, after I had warned key informants that I was withdrawing from fieldwork, Kurt turned up to a social event with a ‘leaving present’ for me. It was an army-style ‘dog tag’ inscribed with my name and status; the latter read simply ‘Field observer’.

There is a danger in methodological writing that researchers over-problematise communicative interaction and social relations through extensive reflection on positionality. Most respondents had a straightforward and reasoned understanding of my position: I was there to ‘report’ what I saw. If that role was performed honestly, fairly and without prior prejudice, the fact that I had different views was not an issue. Respondents made no assumption that what I would report would be wholly positive – they were sometimes critical of the movement and certain individuals in it themselves – but they believed that I would see things ‘as they are’ and that this provided a counterbalance to intentionally negative media reporting. They often described this as being ‘neutral’ or ‘neither for nor against’ (field diary, 19 October 2012).

This is not to say there were not moments of tension and challenge but, as a rule, respondents understood the difficulty of my position and could empathise...
with it. One local division member commented that people in the movement appreciated that I was somewhere between a rock and a hard place and that they understood that what I would subsequently write could not be exactly what they say (field diary, 21 April 2014). The study had no systematic dialogic element, although I have talked through some of the provisional findings, and shared excerpts from the book manuscript, with individual respondents. I also showed the documentary film to a small group of respondents; their conclusion was that it was ‘honest’ (field diary, 31 August 2014). I discussed with respondents some of the presentations I had made to non-academic communities whilst still conducting fieldwork. In one case, this was to inform them that I had done a presentation at an anti-racist NGO event and, in a second case, I sounded out core respondents prior to accepting an invitation to present research findings to the police (at a Prevent programme training event). In both cases, the response was positive (field diary, 4 May 2013).

Challenging racism

Acceptance as ‘other’, of course does not resolve issues relating to researching ‘distasteful’ movements. On the contrary, the more I became accepted for who I was, the more I found myself in situations in which large amounts of alcohol were consumed and racist and sexist comments were freely traded. The fact that this is done as ‘banter’ or ‘wind up’ does not alleviate any of the discomfort. Discomfort was experienced also on a number of occasions when interviewing respondents in public places such as cafes or bars where I was extremely conscious of the presence of members of the public who might be able to hear the conversation and find it offensive or even intimidating. In these situations the researcher is caught between conflicting demands. On the one hand ethnographic empathy extends not just to the interlocutor but to those sitting nearby. On the other, any intervention would clearly alter the respondent’s openness and responsiveness and thus inhibit understanding.

How should the researcher respond to such situations? Back and Solomos (1993: 188) view the range of possible responses as inadequate and ask whether non-response to racist comments or ideas communicated to researchers during fieldwork effectively legitimises these ideas through silence. In this research I rarely chose not to respond at all; where this option was taken it was in situations when comments or actions were judged to be primarily demonstrative and designed to test whether I would conform to the ‘liberal left elite’ type. This is captured in the following diary entry after a day spent with a group of youth division members:

…it was a tough day. Partly because they are young, partly for demonstrative purposes I think, Connor constantly made strongly racist remarks and sometimes in earshot of those he was abusing. These moments were really difficult to handle and I found myself moving away, looking away, cringing frequently but not intervening because I felt I was being tested both as an adult (always telling
kids off) and an outsider (when will I crack and reveal UAF colours?). I suspect Connor knows what he is doing. (Field diary, 2 February 2013)

Moreover, not responding immediately, in a way that will heighten tension, is not no response. Later that day, when Connor was on his own, for example, there was an opportunity to talk to him more seriously and point out the racist nature of generalising about groups of people based on cultural markers (such as religion) as well as skin colour. As part of my response to his question about whether I ‘agree with EDL views’, I say that it disturbs me when some people in the EDL talk about Muslims as ‘this’ or ‘that’ and he responds by saying ‘to be honest I have seen a lot of racists at EDL demos, including people doing Nazi salutes’ (field diary, 2 February 2013).

Another way of engaging in this debate was during interviews when, in discussing their experience of demonstrations, I routinely asked respondents if they felt uncomfortable with any chants and/or whether they felt some chants contradicted claims by the movement that it was ‘not racist’. Often I would share my own discomfort with what was being chanted or said around me. I also felt that it was appropriate to correct statements that were blatantly inaccurate (accepting that many urban myths circulated might also have been challenged). One example of this was Connor’s claim during interview that ‘The English language is actually the second spoken language in England now.’ This was clearly a misrepresentation of data from the 2011 census released that day, which had shown that Polish was the second most-spoken language in England and Wales after English. I told him this and suggested he go back and check his source. During informal communication – ‘banter’ – however, I usually responded immediately and in kind, by making pointed but not didactic comments about the gap between on-message (not racist) and off-message talk. The use of the term ‘Muzzie’, in particular, would prompt me to challenge respondents to think about whether terms used to refer to Muslims, or generalisations made about them, were really that dissimilar from the ‘racist’ comments they disapproved (field diary, 16 June 2013).

On one occasion during fieldwork I considered whether the appropriate response might be to turn to the police. This was following an interview with Andrew (an Infidels member on the extreme fringe of the EDL) who recounted his empathy for Anders Breivik and his feeling of being ‘similar’ to him. Given that Andrew worked as a teaching assistant, I considered whether something had been disclosed that indicated the threat of harm to others and warranted overriding the confidentially agreement with the respondent (as provided for in the ethics framework of the project). On reflection I decided it did not. Since Andrew had been suspended from his position at the school because of media coverage of his views and he was already being monitored by police, no additional measures to prevent harm to the public could have followed from me reporting him. I also chose not to pursue contact with this respondent (or indeed the other two Infidels members) beyond the interview.

Perhaps an even greater challenge is presented in the interpretation and presentation of respondent narratives. Allowing respondents to tell their stories as
they understand them is a key principle of the ethnographic approach. Uncritically accepting and re-presenting these stories when working with ‘distasteful’ groups, however, opens the researcher to accusations of legitimating or condoning the views expressed. As Fielding (1993: 149) argues, analysis is also limited if ‘it is informed first and last by scepticism’, since if the fieldwork begins with an attempt to catch members out, rather than attempting to see why a worldview appeals to a particular group, the analysis will never be able to take members’ beliefs seriously. Finding the right line to tread here has been extremely difficult, especially in cases where respondents present confirmation of ‘urban myths’ through reference to their own experience. Through subsequent chapters of this book, therefore, I have treated respondents in the same ways as I have those in other ethnographic studies; I have presented their stories as they have told them and reflected where appropriate on whether their accounts can or cannot be confirmed by observation or other evidence. The objective of the research is to understand how EDL activists interpret the social world rather than to judge whether those interpretations are ‘true’.

**Who are you? Constraints on research relations**

The positionality I took into the field in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, educational background was secondary to the political markers discussed above in terms of affecting field relations. However, even if none of these factors had a particularly inhibiting impact on the research, they need to be taken into account.

Gender shaped research relations. Relatively few women attended demonstrations and thus, even though being a woman did not prohibit access to the movement, any new female face attracted attention. The most constraining aspect of gender identity was that many women were in, or had been in, relationships with men in the movement. While my position as a researcher meant that mostly I escaped this labelling, the high turnover in the movement, and the impossibility that all people knew who I was, meant that I was also subject to rumour and assumptions. I was fortunate to have two close female respondents whose activism was completely independent of any men and this created a secure space for the expression of female solidarity in amongst the unremitting sexual banter (field diary, 29 September 2012).

One role that attached to being a woman in the group was that of ‘emotion work’ (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002: 107). While this affected EDL activists more (see Chapter 3), it was something that I experienced also. This often took the form of ‘talking down’ men from potentially violent exchanges. One evening was spent responding to a series of emotional messages (personal inbox) from a core respondent to prevent him getting into a violent dispute with a neighbour and fellow EDL member. I wrote this up in my field diary the following day as feeling like ‘me setting him boundaries and him looking for some reason to take control of himself’ (field diary, 29–30 April 2013). A month later, I recorded a similar feeling of being ‘like a typical girl playing the role of pulling the lads away from fights’ following participation in a flash demonstration when limited
police presence led to direct engagement with the opposition (field diary, 18 May 2013).

In this study, whiteness was not a prerequisite for accessing the group but carried the advantage of ‘majority’ status that did not need to be explained or justified (see also Back, 2002: 48). However, as the work of both Nayak in the UK (1999, 2005) and Ezekiel (1995, 2002) in the USA demonstrates, ‘close up’ research on white racist subcultures does not require common ethnic or religious background to produce insight into the social construction of whiteness (Back, 2002: 48). As indicated by the chant often directed at UAF counter-demonstrators of ‘You’re not English any more’, exclusion from the category of ‘us’ among EDL supporters is based first and foremost not on race, ethnicity or religion but on alliance with what is perceived to be a hegemonic liberal elite that blindly pursues a mantra of political correctness and fails to stand up against Islamic extremism.

The potential for my assignment to this last category, given that universities are seen as the ‘breeding ground of UAF’ (field diary, 12 January 2013), and how that might impact on the research, was discussed above. Returning from a break in attending demonstrations for health reasons, I found the significant turnover in membership meant I had to regain acceptance, recording in my field diary that ‘I feel a bit self-conscious at the start with people I don’t know. I realise that I talk differently – both [regional] accent and vocabulary’ (field diary, 10 May 2014). However, given the huge difference in opportunity that I had from educational background and employment, and that, in terms of my regional identity, I am an ‘outsider’, the hostility, even banter, I was subjected to on this front was less of a barrier than anticipated. It is possible that gender is a mitigating factor here, making me less threatening to male status. Or perhaps it is simply the failure to live up to stereotype that disarms. Bucerius (2013: 716) notes that in forging relationships with young male Turkish drug dealers in Germany, it was important that she defied their stereotypes of a ‘typical German robot woman’ who cares only about her career, while Ezekiel (2002: 63) found that when he failed to conform to respondents’ images of a medieval Jew they responded positively to him as somebody who listened to them and showed, by attention and action over time, that they matter. Over and above any socio-demographic variable that either facilitated or hindered the research, this is the crucial factor. Time spent in the field builds trust that the researcher is who they say they are; who that is, is secondary.

**Politics, ethics and the academic community**

The experience of conducting this study suggests that individual researcher ‘dis-taste’ for the community being researched is sufficiently surmountable to mean that ethnographic methods can produce new and important knowledge about those studied. Indeed, the sustained contact and presence in the everyday lives of respondents that ethnography entails reveal that the behaviours which make subjects outcasts usually constitute a small part of their everyday lives (Kirby and
Corzine, 1981: 10). Being part of the whole lives of research respondents thus allows a range of subject positions other than ‘member of far right organisation’ – shared class allegiances and political origins, gender and a number of life-course experiences – to become (albeit sometimes slippery) stepping stones to mutually trusting and respectful relationships. This suggests that what constrains our knowledge is not only a lack of shared values between researchers and these particular communities but a wider problem – within and beyond the academic community – of placing subjects whose political views we do not agree with as ‘out of bounds’ for research (1981: 15).

This is far from a new phenomenon. In an article published more than three decades ago Kirby and Corzine (1981: 4) recount how their early research on gay subculture attracted moral condemnation in a process of ‘guilt by association’ (1981: 4). Their honest and open explication of the hostility they encountered to their research (among the academic community as well as the broader public) resonates with my own experience. My previous ethnographic studies with marginal or marginalised groups (including refugees and forced migrants, drug users, punks and skinheads) had attracted constructively critical responses from academic colleagues on methodological questions (field relations, mutual responsibilities and obligations between researcher and research subjects, trust and verification, exit from the field etc.). This time the very act of ethnographic engagement with the EDL seemed to evoke moral indignation. I found myself accused of not taking a significantly ‘critical position’ in relation to my research subjects and of ‘implying’ my support for EDL views.

Clearly the study of groups such as the EDL is not ‘out of bounds’ per se; there is, after all, an established subject area of ‘far right studies’. What seems to be beyond the pale is the application of ethnographic research methods to this social phenomenon. Unlike studies of voting intentions or electoral support for far right parties using either survey or qualitative interview methods, ethnographic research requires ‘direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures)’ (O’Reilly, 2005: 2). As Kirby and Corzine (1981: 13) point out, the contagion of stigma relates not only to the initial moral discomfort with the group studied but there is ‘an additional stigma that arises from personal contact’. While they understand this as the extension of ‘labelling’ – as researchers come to be seen as members of the group being studied – I would argue that the problem is less the label than its ‘stickiness’ (Ahmed, 2004: 117–19). Stickiness, Ahmed argues, ensues from the emotions that circulate between bodies and signs and align individuals with communities (or bodily space with social space). It was this personal contact, the sharing of this affective space, that made the research possible; it marked me as ‘the researcher bird’ (accepted outsider) rather than ‘journalist’ (threatening outsider). At the same time, by engaging in that emotional space, the researcher becomes a player in its ‘affective economy’ (Ahmed, 2004) and suspect to the outside world since it calls into question the researcher’s ability to regain sufficient distance to take up the necessary ‘critical position’. As Back (2002: 34) reflects, in relation to the moment he moved from an Internet-based study of nationalist movements to a face-to-face interview with Nick Griffin...
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(later to become leader of the British National Party), ‘the stakes change when one decides to look into the face of racial extremism’. Criticisms are rarely made ‘in principle’ but are voiced in terms of individual researchers’ failure to state their own political position, to take a sufficiently critical stance towards respondents’ views (both in and after the field) or to consistently ‘other’ research subjects when talking about shared field experiences. This raises the crucial question of the relationship between politics, ethics and research.

There is a growing trend within social movement research for research ethics to explicitly include a statement of the political objectives of the research (Gillies and Alldred, 2002: 48) and for academics to consciously take on the role of ‘activist-scholars’ (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012: 135) or conduct politically engaged research through ‘militant ethnography’ that rejects the divide between observer and practitioner (Juris, 2008: 64). Such approaches, however, assume at least a broad political alignment between the researcher and the movement studied, which becomes deeply problematic – and likely to meet profound critique from the same activist-scholars – when the movement concerned is perceived to be ‘racist’ or ‘far right’. That sociological research cannot be value-free is widely accepted and in many traditions, researchers explicitly align themselves with relatively powerless social groups (Smyth and Mitchell, 2008: 441). However, in studies of far right activism, such side-taking feels wrong:

On a pivotal afternoon very early in the project, I was driving to Detroit to continue our conversations and thinking about the life of one of the young men. I had been getting a sense of what his life had been and what its onward trajectory was likely to be. What could be done, I asked myself, that would help him have a more competent sense of himself, that would encourage him to take a firmer grasp on his life – to begin to understand that his life mattered and that it could be directed in a hopeful way? I pondered and abruptly shook myself: ‘What am I doing, worrying about a Nazi?’ I thought about it. And then from my gut came the reply: ‘He is also a kid. It cannot be wrong to be concerned about a kid.’ (Ezekiel, 2002: 63–64)

Indeed, Ezekiel has a long-standing concern about kids; earlier published work had highlighted poverty among African American communities in inner-city Detroit. In this later study of poor white kids who turned to racist organisations to give them a sense that their lives had some meaning, he reveals continuities between the cases in terms of the stigmatisation of the poor, the failure to tackle long-term deskilling and unemployment in inner-city areas, lack of personal connectedness and warmth that gives meaning and prospect to life (see also Pilkington, Omel’chenko and Garifzianova, 2010: 229). The difference is that in the first case, as the victims of racism, research subjects are perceived to be a legitimate, powerless group with whom the social scientist may ‘side’; in the latter case, as the perpetrators of racism, the research becomes dirty and the researcher guilty of failing ‘to keep his subjects at arm’s length’. This moral overdetermination of power and powerlessness obscures a more complex understanding of social relations in which the oppressed can also perpetuate oppression. Of course
not all socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged people take political paths that oppress the rights of others, but that does not take away their own disadvantage or make it unworthy of social research; if this is a possible outcome of it, indeed, it becomes all the more important to understand.

Accepting that research is not value-free and that political intent should be openly acknowledged and effective interventions sought, who decides what constitutes an appropriate or acceptable political position? In a highly reflective piece that engages directly with the experience of conducting anti-racist research, Back and Solomos (1993: 196) recognise that there is ‘no easy way for research on racism that is not in some way political’. Yet, in the absence of concrete strategies for effecting change, they reflect, it is also all too easy for researchers to construct ‘an elaborate form of credentialism where one simply identifies oneself as doing “anti-racist research”’ when what is needed is a more flexible approach (1993: 196). Thus the anti-racist political agenda of research needs, sometimes, to be strategically shelved in favour of a speaking position as an ‘impartial academic’ in the interests of making a more effective long-term intervention (1993: 194).

This raises the possibility that rigid standpoint positions – where they lead to the moral condemnation of non-standpoint positions – may constrain what we know about the world and thus what we can change in it. ‘The contagion of stigma’, Kirby and Corzine (1981: 14) argue, ‘has an effect on the overall level of research on homosexuality and other sensitive topics’. In the case of far right groups, not allowing ‘subjects to give their own account’ has effectively narrowed and impoverished the field of study, reducing it to macro-scale correlations between, for example, social class and political belief and leaving unexplored questions of the connection between beliefs and activism (Fielding, 1981: 15–18). The problem is, as I have argued above, not so much that researchers are unable to develop the trust with respondents necessary to facilitate that ‘own account’-giving process but that this requires a level of subjective engagement that is experienced as politically and ethically uncomfortable.

Conclusion

Why undertake ethnographic study if it blurs boundaries and disrupts the moral norms of the academic community? First, it has been argued here, employing an ethnographic method in the study of far right groups extends the parameters of what we know and problematises and expands our understanding of the phenomenon. The sustained contact and presence in the everyday lives of respondents that ethnography entails reveals that ideological concerns may be secondary to other practices, particularly among young members of far right groups (Nayak, 1999, 2005; Kimmel, 2007; Pilkington, Omel’chenko and Garifzianova, 2010; Pilkington, 2014a; Garland and Treadwell, 2011). This raises questions about the desirability of employing standpoint positions or declaring the researcher’s political intent at the outset of research. While in some cases this may forge rapport with research subjects and enhance knowledge, it also risks confining findings to
the question of ideology and reducing the capacity of qualitative research to adapt and develop with the research process in order to understand the object of study as it is found rather than as it is imagined. This is not a call to revert to a naturalistic version of ethnography which denies subjectivity in the research process (Willis, 1997: 247) and makes false claims to scientific objectivity (Clifford, 1986: 2) but to employ a form of ‘epistemic reflexivity’, which not only acknowledges the social and personal drives of the individual researcher but forces us to scrutinise the very act of construction of the object of study in the theories, problems and categories of scholarly judgement (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 38).

Second, existing research on the far right in the UK continues to emanate primarily from a political science perspective and draw its evidence from statistics on voter preference or the analysis of official programmes and statements (Copsey, 2010; Goodwin et al., 2010; Allen, 2011; Goodwin, 2011a). The recent Internet-based survey of EDL supporters conducted by Demos (Bartlett and Littler, 2011) has filled in some of the gaps identified by Allen (2011: 285) in our knowledge about the profile of EDL supporters. However, this and other studies based on the social media (Jackson, 2011a, 2011c), whilst illuminating, are able to answer questions about the significance of social media for resource mobilisation and social network development better than they can address questions of what motivates and sustains movements like the EDL. While there is a small body of work that includes qualitative interviewing (Klandermans and Mayer (eds), 2006; Garland and Treadwell, 2011; Rhodes, 2011), ethnographic research is extremely rare (the exception here is Busher, 2012, 2013). The ‘real people’ missing from academic research in the field are substituted by literature based on investigative journalism (Trilling, 2012) or authored by oppositional political activists, including those who were formerly members of far right movements (Hann and Tilzey, 2003; Collins, M., 2011). In this sense we have moved little nearer to resolving the absence of any ‘humanistic account of an extreme Right movement’ (Fielding, 1981: 16), as noted by Fielding more than three decades ago.

Third, while there is a clear preference among researchers for studying those communities with which they empathise, there are no insurmountable methodological obstacles to conducting ‘close up’ research with ‘distasteful’ communities. The experience of this study, and others, has shown that sufficient trust and mutual respect can be built to allow meaningful research that extends our knowledge. As Ezekiel (1995: xx) states simply, ‘I hate racism, which sunders the world I want to live in and harms great masses; but I have no trouble knowing that the racist is a comprehensible human: We went to school together.’ The continued paucity of ethnographic studies on the ‘far right’, it has been suggested, therefore is not simply a problem of individual mismatch between researchers and subjects, but a wider problem of the ‘contagion of stigma’ attached to research with such groups. While this is often voiced through the critique of individual researchers for their lack of political standpoint, it reflects a wider tendency when it comes to issues around the far right – specifically fascism or the Holocaust – to view social phenomena as aberrations dispossessed of any rationally graspable cause and, as a result, ‘condemnation replaces explanation’ (Laclau, 2005: 249). Not only does
this substitution impoverish the substantive and methodological knowledge base of the social sciences but, whilst posturing as a critical political stance, in fact it constitutes one of the main forms of contemporary political ‘faintheartedness’ (2005: 249).

**Notes**

1 One of these was an English Volunteer Force (EVF) demonstration. Another was formally organised by the North West Alliance. See Appendix 1 for full details.
2 See https://myplaceresearch.wordpress.com/films.
3 Of these, thirty-five are considered the core respondent set (see Appendix 2). An additional three were assigned pseudonyms because they are mentioned frequently in the fieldwork diary although they are not included in the formal ‘respondent set’. The final respondent, the Chairman of the EDL Management Group at the time, was interviewed as an ‘expert’ rather than as a grassroots activist and is referred to by his real name.
4 These arrests, but not their indiscriminate nature, are noted in: www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/wfnews/9906196.print. Accessed: 26.08.2015.
5 This researcher prefers not to be named.
6 Unite Against Fascism (UAF) is an umbrella organisation of anti-fascist groups closely linked to the Socialist Workers Party. It is the organising body of most of the counter-demonstrations to EDL national demonstrations and is used as shorthand by EDL members to indicate the ‘main enemy’.
7 All communications are reported verbatim, including syntax and punctuation.
8 For this reason the decision to leave text from interviews exactly as spoken was an extremely difficult one and was taken because this is also part of respondents’ identities and its ‘correction’ would have been disempowering.