




Research Note

Methodological considerations for the special-risk researcher: A research note

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Heather Alberro 

Abstract

Researchers seeking to investigate the dynamics and individuals constituting today's myriad social movements must grapple with attendant challenges such as designing a methodological framework appropriate for investigating subjects and phenomena of interest, as well as gaining and maintaining access to groups of interest. Such challenges are magnified many times over when the groups under investigation pose potential special safety risks to themselves as well as researchers through engagement in dangerous or illegal activities, problematize previously conceived research criteria for suitable participants due to their amorphous and transient organizational dynamics or are otherwise difficult to access. In this research note, I recount my experiences in the field and the various methodological readjustments I was compelled to make as a result while conducting qualitative investigations of radical environmental activists for my PhD thesis. It is hoped that the experiences and insights gleaned from the research note will be deemed of value for future scholars engaging in 'special-risk' research.

Keywords

Radical environmentalism, Anthropocene, social movements, qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews, Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Desperate times, desperate measures? Enter radical environmental activists (REAs)

Mounting socio-ecological perturbations such as anthropogenic climate change and the sixth-mass extinction (Ceballos et al., 2017) herald the emergence of a new era marked by the extensive impacts of a humanity-turned-geological force: the Anthropocene (Steffen et al., 2007). In response, recent decades have seen the emergence of 'political ecologist' or radical environmental groups (Rootes, 2004) who tend to engage in extra-parliamentary political struggles that seek to initiate profound cultural, onto-epistemological, socioeconomic and structural changes in contemporary capitalist societies. REAs generally tend to regard industrial capitalism, with its drive towards ceaseless expansion, profit accumulation and the commodification of life itself (Bookchin, 2005; Moore, 2014), as a key force underlying environmental degradation. In service of their transformative aims, and driven by profound grief (Pike, 2016) and desperation over the declining state of the biosphere, REAs have become notorious for their use of direct-action tactics—tree sit-ins, massive road

blockades, ship-ramming and even 'ecotage' or the sabotage of environmentally destructive machinery and property. However, far from targeting living beings, such tactics are aimed solely at ecologically destructive enterprises and machinery, and intend to serve as last lines of defence for stemming ecological decline (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Bondaroff, 2014) by rendering ecologically destructive activities economically non-viable.

While existing literature has laid the essential groundwork by investigating the general parameters of REA identities, historical trajectories, deep ecological orientations, tactics and organizational dynamics (Bondaroff, 2011; Cianchi, 2015; Hoek, 2010; Ingalsbee, 1996; Marangudakis, 2001; Nagtzaam, 2013; Pike, 2016; Stuart et al., 2013; Taylor, 1991; Wall, 1999), key questions warrant further elucidation: what are their deepest motivations for action despite

Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

Corresponding author:

Heather Alberro, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham NG1 4FQ, UK.

Email: heather.alberro@ntu.ac.uk; Twitter: @AlberroHeather



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their claims of the inevitability of ecological collapse? Precisely what factors underlie their unorthodox orientations towards the human–nature relationship, which seemingly would extend equal value to trees and whales? Most importantly, how do REAs propose to reconstruct the human–nature–animal relationship along more harmonious trajectories? Although I had been well aware of how notoriously elusive extremist political groups such as REAs are, and therefore of the unique methodological challenges that I would face in researching them, I had not adequately anticipated the nature and extent of the difficulties to come, as well as the requisite alterations in methodological approach and design that would have to be made. Below I recount my experiences as a special-risk researcher in the hopes of illuminating the path for future scholars similarly interested and engaged in investigating the more elusive and heterodoxical pockets of the social world.

Initial methodological considerations

Qualitative methodologies seek first and foremost deeper understandings of the nuances of experiences and phenomena not amenable to large-scale quantitative analysis, or the ‘why’s’ rather than merely the ‘what’s’ of the social world (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Likewise, I sought to uncover key factors underlying the behavioural motivations, worldviews and visions for alternate worlds of notoriously difficult-to-access groups of activists. Semi-structured interviews in particular, which allow for rich elucidation on behalf of the participants, seemed most suitable for the project’s overarching research aims (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002: 673). Such an open-ended approach helps to increase the validity of responses by providing respondents with more room for organizing their answers according to their own frameworks (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002), though one potential disadvantage is that it can render subsequent coding and analysis more complex (p. 674). Moreover, the use of other qualitative methods such as focus groups in special-risk research can be instrumental for elucidating inter-participant and broader organizational dynamics within the context of a group interview (Krueger, 2014). However, in a case such as this, with research subjects who are adamant about preserving their anonymity and are thus often wary of researchers and formal research settings, one-on-one interviews proved more appropriate (and adaptable from in-person to digital format, as will be denoted shortly).

Semi-structured interviews proved more commensurate with the stated project’s research objectives, which focus on delineating central themes surrounding individuals’ (as members of a broader collective) worldviews and deep-seated motivations for action. Nevertheless, as in all other fields, the qualitative researcher must remain ever critical and reflexive about the potential strengths as well as limitations of their preferred theoretical and methodological frameworks, such as the degree of external validity of

generalizations made on the basis of the research findings (Payne and Williams, 2005). Although I would contend that when researching heterodoxical groups, wherein the interest is precisely in their radical singularity and, therefore, non-generalizability to wider populations, the focus shifts more towards *how* and *why* they might differ so substantially. What is crucial to keep in mind and to make transparent in the finalized research project is that the data and analyses featured constitute necessarily limited glimpses into the wider reality of REA movements. The data and analyses alluded to herein pertain to individuals situated in particular times and spaces, and therefore cannot be applied with any assuredness to REA groups elsewhere, as Rootes (2004) has documented with regard to the divergent histories and tactical repertoires between US and UK Earth First!ers. Nevertheless, for those interested in shedding light on the nuance and complexity surrounding singular phenomena and groups that disrupt rather than coincide with the norm, qualitative methods will likely yield the richest insights.

Before gaining access to participants, it is instrumental to first seek the help of a gatekeeper, a core member of the group under investigation, particularly with difficult-to-access groups. Establishing and maintaining contact with such groups becomes virtually infeasible without the trust conferred through association with gatekeepers. Gatekeepers often serve as catalysts for snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008), an especially useful methodological tool for accessing elusive or otherwise ‘hidden’ populations (i.e. non-institutionalized drug-users, gangs, organized crime syndicates, etc.) (Pawelz, 2018; Sifaneck and Neaigus, 2001) as the chances of success in further recruitment of initially cautious participants are greatly improved when the researcher is referred to them by trusted group members. Initially, I had planned on conducting approximately 30 semi-structured interviews through the use of 11 questions designed to assess (1) the origins of activist ecological worldviews and deepest action motivators; (2) their diagnoses of key structural, socioeconomic, cultural and political drivers of extant socio-ecological decline and (3) their visions for a harmonious socio-ecological order. An initial aim was to utilize the ethnographic method of participant observation (Spradley, 2016) as a rich supplement to the semi-structured interviews that would form the core component of the project’s methodological framework. Finally, all data were to be analyzed utilizing the foundational method of thematic analysis, or the analysis of themes (patterns of meaning) within and across data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this particular case, the interest was in ecological concepts and themes that in varying ways refer to the core research questions, denoting, for instance, particular conceptualizations of the natural world and more-than-human life, behavioural motivations and prognoses of more harmonious modes of human–animal–nature relationality.

Early encounters and subsequent methodological reconfigurations

Prior to commencing my research, I needed to seek ethical approval from my university's College Research Degrees Committee (CRDC), and as the project was deemed 'special risk' due to the nature of the groups under investigation, a series of additional checks and procedures had to be undertaken before ethical approval could be granted. The aforementioned is a decidedly time-consuming process, so future researchers whose projects might be classed as 'special risk' would do well to begin ethical proceedings as early as possible in order to avoid delays. Once ethical clearance was granted on the condition that I do not personally take part in direct-action feats, data collection was to commence through interviews and participant observation at the anarchic REA group Earth First!'s biannual gathering during the summer of 2017, consisting of days of direct-action planning and networking. Not having had any prior contact with them, as in the early stages of the project I lacked understandings that only experience can provide, I decided to attend the event as an unacquainted researcher seeking to learn more about the groups and to meet like-minded individuals.

Here, it is worth revealing that I happen to have similar ideological and political leanings as my research subjects, which greatly facilitated the establishment and maintenance of rapport. While I do not subscribe to the view that it is possible or even desirable for a researcher to be value-free (Becker, 1967), a lack of transparency and reflexivity on this matter can jeopardize the crucial maintenance of some critical distance. As previously suggested, establishing contact early on (in this case, at the first gathering) with a gatekeeper proved essential for establishing rapport and trust with other members, maintaining access to the groups and aiding subsequent participant recruitment. This particular individual, as a long-standing member of the UK REA movement, helped introduce me to other activists of interest who otherwise might have declined to participate. Nevertheless, it took many more months of correspondence through email and social media platforms, as well as my personally attending numerous meetings and events, before I was welcomed as a trusted member of their group, and participant recruitment began to proceed relatively smoothly. Even still, concerns surrounding anonymity and the potentially incriminating nature of the data collected continued to impede further recruitment.

One of the REA groups under investigation, the radical marine protection organization, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS), presented a distinct set of difficulties, thus shedding light on further challenges that can arise when conducting fieldwork, particularly with difficult-to-access groups. SSCS has become an international movement sporting a fleet of 12 ships for the reduction and/or elimination of the illegal (and, immoral, according to the activists) slaughter of whales and other marine life. SSCS's formidable

direct-action feats have included positioning their vessels and bodies between hunted whales and harpoon ships, harassing and ramming whaling and pirate fishing vessels (Nagtzaam, 2013) (though they have since ended their anti-whaling campaigns in the Southern Ocean) and ecological sabotage (ecotage) of equipment and property used to harm or kill wildlife (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Bondaroff, 2014). As SSCS do not host any large-scale activist gatherings on land like their terrestrial counterparts do, the only viable place to conduct an ethnography of any sort would be aboard one of their ships. However, conducting research aboard ships that often remain out at sea for months at a time, in occasionally volatile weather conditions and in potentially dangerous confrontations with pirate whaling and fishing vessels, proved ethically unfeasible. Similar concerns would attend special-risk researchers in other contexts, wherein the groups under investigation operate in high-risk or otherwise dangerous geographical locations. Thus, an awareness of the potential difficulties and risks relating to research sites, specifically whether or not illegal and/or potentially life-threatening activities might be taking place, as well as the degree to which such contexts are compatible with the methods under consideration is essential both prior to commencing fieldwork and throughout.

After attending my first Earth First! gathering and following correspondence with my gatekeeper, I was informed that, due to the sensitive nature of the activities being discussed at the gathering (plans for ecotage), and the considerable trepidation on behalf of the activists born of numerous traumatic encounters with undercover police officers infiltrating their groups, the activists did not feel comfortable having an 'outsider' observing them and taking notes on their various proceedings. Indeed, the pamphlets published for each gathering explicitly state that researchers are not allowed to conduct data collection at the events for the reasons stated above. As a result of the aforementioned experiences, which belied previously held notions and expectations of what the research process and the subjects of enquiry might be like, the methodological framework initially set out at the start of the project gradually morphed into something rather distinct. In place of participant observation, I was forced to opt instead for document analysis (of texts, articles and commentary on key REA websites) as a supplement to the semi-structured interviews in order to piece together a coherent image of the nature of REAs' ecological modes of relationality and visions for a more resilient socio-ecological future.

Initially, these methodological alterations seemed like considerable drawbacks, wherein I would no longer be able to utilize a method that has repeatedly proved promising by way of its thorough immersion within the research context and consequent production of richly detailed data. As researchers, many of us set out with a vision of how our research will progress, what steps will be taken in which particular order and expectations of what the objects or subjects under investigation will be like. Yet, experiences in the field

often belie such methodical estimations and, though this might seem disconcerting, it needn't so. The research experience is simultaneously exhilarating, at times disappointing, surprising in its variability and uncertainty, and ultimately incredibly rewarding. Upon shifting focus towards a new methodological framework that was more in-line with the phenomena and individuals under investigation, my participants became interested in and actively engaged with the research process rather than regarding it with apprehension.

Investigating ever-shifting assemblages

The structure and very nature of the groups that I had initially set out to study similarly turned out to be decidedly different than anticipated. Through further involvement at EF! meetings and gatherings, I came to realize that 'EF!ers', at least in the United Kingdom, though they identify with the philosophies of Earth First!, are also actively involved with other groups such as Reclaim The Power, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and Frack-Off. 'EF!' as a group consists only of a handful of relatively constant members known as the 'collective' who help organize events, fundraising and logistics. Beyond this, however, there is no 'EF!' in the sense of a traditional organization with an enduring structure, stable leadership or formal membership. In thought, action and modes of relationality, they operate more like assemblages (Latour, 2005), wherein individuals occupy temporarily fixed positions and alliances are forged and then dissipated in dynamic and ever-shifting spatial-temporal configurations. An activist might serve in a leadership role in a particular situation, such as carrying out a direct-action that requires special expertise, though such arrangements are always provisional. They are as such in congruence with their anti-hierarchical political and ecological orientations because such amorphous modes of organization help them evade detection and apprehension by state and law enforcement officials.

The fluid identities, transient constitution of REA groups and networks and overall lack of enduring membership or structures pose yet another set of unique methodological challenges. This is particularly so in the sense of rendering recruitment of participants who match the stated research criteria exceedingly challenging. In such instances, and throughout the research process more generally, considerable malleability on the part of the researcher is warranted. Therefore, in light of aforementioned issues regarding access, I expanded my initial selection criteria of activists who identified as either EF! or SSCS members to any long-standing activists in the REA movement who have been heavily involved in direct-action of some sort and who express 'radicalized identities' (Stuart et al., 2013), that is, individuals who exhibit staunch critiques of the status quo and engage in 'radical' or extra-parliamentary tactics for engendering fundamental socio-ecological transformations. These new and more expansive criteria more closely mirrored the multifarious nature of the groups under

investigation, and thus paved the way for a more thorough and accurate depiction of the 'what's' and 'why's' of their myriad strivings.

Assessing the benefits of online interviewing for special-risk research

Partly stemming from difficulties with access noted previously, due not only to the nature of the groups under study but also to the dispersal of some activists across wide geographic distances, the initial intention of employing the 'gold standard' of face-to-face interviews (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006: 390) was largely abandoned in favour of synchronic online interviews (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). The range of benefits offered by the latter, particularly with regard to special-risk research, casts doubt on the notion that traditional face-to-face interviews are among the most fruitful tools available for qualitative researchers. Potential drawbacks of non-face-to-face interviewing, which require consideration and continuous reflection on behalf of the researcher, include the risk of failing to pick up on crucial non-verbal cues, difficulty in building or maintaining rapport with participants (O'Connor et al., 2008) and the potential exclusion of participants of interest who might not have access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). In this study, however, such difficulties as the building and maintenance of rapport were largely overcome through previous face-to-face interactions and familiarity with some of the participants, while extensive prior communication via email and social media platforms took place with those for whom face-to-face interactions proved infeasible.

Regarding potential issues with access to ICTs that thereby might yield non-representative samples, none of the activists approached for participation denoted a lack of access to/competence regarding the use of ICTs. Although, of course, where this is not the case, the researcher may wish to reassess the suitability of online interviewing. Moreover, with regard to the importance that the participants sampled be more or less representative of the target group (REAs), it is posited that online interviewing via ICTs generates more diverse and representative samples by facilitating access to participants from a variety of geographical, national and cultural backgrounds. The nearly ubiquitous presence and accessibility of Facebook video and Skype allowed me to access key participants from across the world, including Australia, South America, Canada, the United States and continental Europe, who I otherwise would not have been able to access through solely relying on face-to-face interviews due to the considerable financial and time costs associated with the latter. I was thus able to introduce a cross-cultural element into my data that lent new significance to my findings. Furthermore, experience proved that the remote nature of online interviewing helps facilitate further reflection by

participants on sensitive topics, as to some degree it lacks the immediate intimacy more characteristic of in-person interviews (O'Connor and Madge, 2004). Some of my participants' heightened concerns with preserving their anonymity were largely assuaged by their abilities to conceal their identities through the use of pseudonyms on their Skype and Facebook profiles for our interviews. Especially useful for special-risk research is the audio-only function which, as with phone interviews, provides an additional mediator for preserving anonymity and thus facilitating participant confidence.

Concluding reflections

Research with difficult-to-access yet exceedingly interesting groups such as REAs, though often fraught with unique methodological difficulties and challenges, can also be decidedly rewarding if approached with special deliberation as discussed throughout this research note. My experiences in the field and throughout the project, especially in terms of establishing contact and maintaining rapport, and subsequent methodological alterations attending to novel realizations regarding the groups' singular organizational dynamics, demonstrated that the most important factors for improving success in special-risk research are trust, sensitivity, reflexivity and adaptability. The long-standing designation of extremist political groups such as REAs by significant segments of mainstream society as 'dangerous' or terroristic have led to heavy undercover police infiltration and persecution, which has in turn left lingering emotional and psychological traumas that have rendered many of them deeply suspicious of outsiders. Thus, considerable care and sensitivity are warranted when attempting to establish and maintain contact with such groups as well as throughout the research process, a feat greatly facilitated through prior acquaintance with a gatekeeper and through prolonged and consistent interaction with the activists.

Awareness of general risks associated with research sites, such as geographical location and the potential presence of illegal and/or life-threatening activities, is crucial throughout all stages of research. Once at the interview stage, I found the use of ICTs such as Skype and Facebook video to be especially beneficial for helping to safeguard participant anonymity, thus increasing a sense of security on behalf of the participants and rendering the interview experience more enjoyable for both parties. It was also found that the near ubiquitous presence of ICTs greatly facilitated access to participants across numerous geographical locations, a feat that would have been virtually unfeasible due to the considerable costs and time associated with travel for conducting face-to-face interviews. Such access to a wider pool of participants also served to increase the overall representativeness of the research findings. Finally, I found that methodological alterations induced by unanticipated challenges in the field and a general mismatch between expectations and reality paved

the way for an equally if not more fruitful experience and research findings. Thus, a general openness on the part of the researcher to the messiness of the research process is advisable. It is hoped that the aforementioned insights and experiences prove to be of value to future scholars seeking to investigate similar manifestations of radical difference.

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ORCID iD

Heather Alberro  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1031-5746>

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Author biography

Heather Alberro is a PhD candidate at NTU's Department of Politics and International Relations, part of the 'Ethics, Ecology, & Identity' research group. Her PhD thesis is centred around the investigation of radical environmental groups' deep ecological worldviews, modes of relationality, and fundamental oppositions to the status quo as living manifestations of Ecotopia. However, her background and interests span a range of disciplines including environmental sociology, environmental ethics, English literature, political ecology and environmental science. She completed her BA in Sociology with minor concentrations in English literature and philosophy at the University of Miami, and her MSc in environmental social science at the University of Kent. Among other things, her academic and personal interests involve critical analyses of the human–nature dialectic, specifically interactions with more-than-human species and agentic matter itself, and the ways in which we may radically reconstruct how we subsist, interact with and perceive the natural world along more harmonious trajectories. The onset of the Anthropocene and the planet's sixth mass extinction have indeed rendered these endeavours more pressing than ever before.