



Nurturing Curiosity Beyond Identity Labels to Find the Radical: Notes on What Encouraged Radical Youth to Participate in Transnational Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Researchers interested in expanding our understanding about individuals, who are silenced by majority societies or those who willingly position themselves close to condemned standpoints, need to also think about ways of approaching and encouraging potential research participants. The current paper frames that need as an act of curiosity and an ethical responsibility. With that framing in hand, the paper explains the process of overcoming difficulties related to recruiting radicalized subpopulations of youngsters (154 self-identified Muslim youth with migration backgrounds and 153 native youth who support movements labeled as far right) in a transnational qualitative research conducted in four different countries (Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands) in 2020–2022. Because both groups are subject to the labels imposed on them by the majority societies (e.g., Muslim, Salafi, conservative, fascist, right wing, etc.), the researchers felt the need to be flexible in the ways they address and approach each participant. In the field, the purposeful efforts of recruitment wording for each individual appeared very useful in encouraging this by nature skeptical group of people. The current paper documents the development of this flexible strategy, which I hope will be useful to many qualitative researchers to facilitate their data collection efforts to identify and reach youth that is on the path of radicalization. We would like to encourage academics to stay curious about these two subpopulations of youth and other marginalized, singled out, and stigmatized groups, and consider interviewing as many individuals as possible in order to discover *the radicals*.

Keywords Rapport building · Radicalization · Participant recruitment · Identity construction · Curiosity

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Introduction

The current paper explains the process of overcoming difficulties related to recruiting radicalized subpopulations of youngsters (154 self-identified Muslim youth with migration backgrounds and 153 native youth who support movements labeled as far right) in a transnational qualitative research conducted in four different countries (Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands) in 2020–2022. The purpose of this paper is to offer adaptive recruitment efforts as a practical suggestion for researchers conducting large-scale qualitative research concerned with populations, who have been marginalized because of their ethnic, religious, or political alignments and, thus, been subject to the labels and identifications imposed on them by the majority societies. Both youth groups often experience marginalization at two levels: first as a minority, hard-to-reach religious and/or ethno-cultural group, and second as a vulnerable age group whose practices of knowledge, knowing, and being a knower are often undermined by elders and the political establishment (Benevento 2023a; Kaya 2021). The research community in Anglosphere countries often label self-identified Muslim youth with migration background simply as “Muslims” and native youth who support far-right movements as “right-wing extremists.” The use of the term “native” in this paper is used to emphasize the latter group’s self-reports of belonging to the titular nation as the autochthonous or “majority” group. The paper acknowledges that native youth, who are in a “numerical minority” (Lazëri 2023) due to their ideological alignments in a given region, may not face the same discrimination or inequality as ethnic or religious minority groups, particularly at the national level, because they are part of the national majority and the dominant group. However, because of marginalization and humiliation, some members of this national majority might feel like a numerical minority in their own communities. The negative feelings and thoughts further their sense of isolation from the rest of society by making them feel like members of a subordinate, minority group (Porter and Washington 1993). As a result, both “Muslims” and “right-wing natives,” which have historically had little contact, are likely to become even more isolated from one another and the rest of society, while also developing more novel and radical narratives to articulate their ethnic, cultural, economic, and political grievances within distinct social movements, physical locations, and cultural spheres (Kaya et al. 2023).

Our field experiences with both subpopulations of youth (self-identified Muslim youth with migration backgrounds and native youth who support movements labeled as far right) revealed that using illustrative labels that stress an individual’s religious or political alignment repurpose the existing stigmas, coalesce very diversified groups of people together, and thus, contribute to a negative response against scientific inquiry among marginalized youth. To counterbalance this backlash against research participation, we found it useful to be flexible in the ways we address and approach each participant and to give them an opportunity to stay active in the data collection processes. We found purposeful and contextual recruitment wording for each individual to be noteworthy and effective for our research. While past literature used terms such as hidden, hard to access, stigmatized

to describe those populations, we chose to call the two youth groups we work with *labeled populations*, as we found that they are not always silenced but labels used to describe them have further highlighted their identities and failed to recognize our research participants' dynamic interpretations of their experiences. The current paper documents the development of our flexible recruitment strategy, which I hope will be useful to many qualitative researchers to reevaluate the existing categories and identity labels they repurpose in their research and to facilitate their interview efforts to identify and reach youth that are on the path of radicalization.

Aim and the Design of The Research Project

The main research project, which brought forth the lessons about participant recruitment described in the current article, aimed to explore the radicalization processes of marginalized, socially deprived, and labeled young people due to their ethnic, religious, or ideological alignments. Conceptualizing the radicalization as an expression of democratic processes, the study examined the narratives of those youth to explore the structural and cultural influences that may be important in the manifestations of political radicalizations and examine overlapping processes among the two subpopulations of youth. Since there is a difference between accepting radical ideas and actively participating in violent acts as a result of those ideas, only a small fraction of those who radicalize actually engage in violent behavior (Wilner and Dubouloz 2010). According to Horgan (Horgan 2009), researchers need to stop looking for “profiles” and start mapping “pathways” when studying violent radicalization, as well as shift their attention from “root causes” to “outer qualities” ((Horgan 2009): 1). The study of those outer qualities involves examination of contextually meaningful parameters and determination of the ideal environment in the variation of radicalization experiences as different people become radicalized in various ways and over various issues (Benevento 2021). As a research based on the preceding conceptualizations, our study concentrated on the processes of radicalization as a mental activity (not always harmful yet, novel) whose roots lie in the interpersonal contexts in which it develops.

People portray forms of radicalizations in various ways and over various issues. It is often hard to tell what constitutes radicalization and it is nearly impossible to track an individual's radicalization over time. While designing the study, the principal investigator of the project had assumed that strong affiliations with political and religious organizations (e.g., Alternative für Deutschland, Milli Görüş, etc.), some spatially unique contexts (e.g., Bible Belt in the Netherlands, Molenbeek in Belgium), would be fruitful places to recruit individuals with radically oriented expressions in line with their religious or ideological alignments. Nevertheless, the experience in the field showed the research team that it is almost impossible to be sure about one's radicalization without having in-depth conversations about their lives, and political and religious views. In other words, it is more likely to discover that one has radical views on some issues than to *sample* a radical individual prior to having conversations about a topic.

Four field researchers from the four aforementioned countries in Europe managed the sampling process, interviews, transcriptions, including the translation of the text to English. The study was conducted as part of the European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant Project. In compliance with the general obligations from the Treaties, European Research Council sets general standards and conducts periodical ethical reviews for all research funded by the program. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

The PI and the desk researchers were in Turkey yet, approachable, and in touch with the field researchers in every step of the research. Research team members frequently organized virtual meetings one on one or in groups. The normalization of transnational online meetings helped us gather and discuss the opportunities and the challenges we experience as a research team. The diversity of the researchers' methodological strategies to find radically oriented Islamist or nativist youth of their countries created opportunities for a participatory research process in which the research team deliberated continuously and reviewed their research practices throughout the fieldwork (see (Kaya and Benevento 2022)).

In order to identify and recruit research participants, the four field researchers strategically proceeded in several distinct but complementary ways. Proven successful in previous studies interested in studying populations that are hard to identify and access (Ellard-Gray et al. 2015; Hoppitt et al. 2012; Rockliffe et al. 2018), researchers focused their efforts on organizations or community connections that are the most specific to the migrant-origin Muslim and the conservative native populations and the identities within those populations. First, the researchers made an overview of Muslim homeland organizations (e.g., Milli Gorus, Diyanet) and native organizations that are labeled as radical or far right (e.g., Identitarian Generation in France, Alternative for Germany in Germany, New Flemish Alliance in Belgium, Christian Union in the Netherlands). To be able to recruit youngsters from these organizations, the field researcher either contacted someone who was considered to be a community representative, such as an imam or a party representative, or directly went to the events organized by the group to meet people. This field effort usually resulted with informal conversations, which helped the researcher to promote and ask the individuals' interest in participating in the current research in person. As shown useful in recent studies employing online platforms to recruit participants (e.g., (Kosinski et al. 2015; Waling et al. 2022)), the field researchers also reviewed social media profiles to find publicly and openly expressive youngsters from those political and religious organizations and contacted them via the social media accounts (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn) they set specifically for the research. Finally, the researchers also used the snowball sampling technique, though with a limited use. One research participant could refer to maximum three other contacts. This way, rather than listening and researching the consensus, we were able to diversify the group of people we contacted and interviewed. After the initial conversation with the potential participant, the researchers scheduled a one-on-one interview in a public place (e.g., a café, park).

Why Comparison? De-construction of Radicalization Through Ethical Curiosity

Designed as a between-group study, our research design aims to identify values, not characteristics, that demonstrate similar political processes among European Muslim youth with migration background and native youth who support movements labeled as far right, for being accustomed to being silenced due to their religious, ethnic, or ideological alignments. Up until now, these two groups have been studied separately. In fact, a tendency to study both groups in depth within their own cultures of existence has been strong in the literature. While many scholars of Islamists do frame their investigation as a broad social science subject relevant to specialists outside the field, they do not include any pertinent comparisons to support the generalizability of their findings (Nugent 2017). Similarly, singular case studies of radical right supporters, be they voters, party elites, or activists, also increased in numbers in the past decade with the rise of the right-wing politics in Europe and beyond. Instead of searching for similarities between groups with comparative evidence, these studies exclusively offer data from either Islamist cases or right-wing supporters. Moving beyond the notion that religion, Islam, nativism, radical right, and Europe are politically unique, a more convincing understanding of radicalization would pose a fundamental question and provide a comparative examination of the evidence in support of a more general language (e.g., (Badea 2023; Benevento 2023b; Lahlou 2023)). As a matter of fact, the comparison of both subpopulations of youth shows that the discourses and reactions are frequently in competition with one another and are similar on certain key characteristics.

Comparative studies with ethnic minorities and majority group members often carry the risk of translating the moral positions of culturally liberal social scientists to favor one group over the other. When professionalism is taken into consideration, all research participants are equal to a social scientist, and it is ethical to approach each and every human subject nonjudgmentally. Yet, during our fieldwork, it was morally easier for field researchers to accept the marginalization of self-identified Muslim communities in Europe than that of native Europeans who are politically aligned with the right. For being at the center of public debate for all the wrong reasons, many social scientists in Europe and beyond have been researching European Muslims with migrant origins for decades. The problem with the study of the radical right, however, is that it rarely allows supporters of right-wing politics to speak their minds in a research setting (Damhuis and de Jonge 2022; Damhuis 2020). Some researchers purposefully decide not to perform fieldwork with radical right groups for moral reasons (Gingrich and Banks 2006). Such researchers claim that far-right already receive (disproportionate) attention so that academics do not need to provide yet another forum for radical right to voice their opinions, which could eventually lead to the normalization of right-wing ideology (Mondon and Winter 2021).

Aside from the theoretical and epistemological reasons for the literature's preference to study these seemingly distinct groups of people separately or never,

there is also the difficulty of finding people and artifacts that can embody both groups in a comparable manner. The difficulty of obtaining representative members of these two complex groups, however, is not a convincing enough reason to stop insisting to continue research. If one is determined to examine the similarities and differences between two silenced groups with “resistant curiosity” (Zurn 2021), they make every effort to stay on the side of marginalization and conduct their study. We often assume that religions, groups, ideologies, nations, and continents are different, but that assumption might be refuted if some similarities appear to be distinctive to humanize general concepts by providing a larger perspective. The rest of the paper will provide researcher’s practical advice when conducting research with subpopulations that have experienced marginalization due to their racial, religious, or political affiliations and have experienced the labels and identifications imposed on them by the majority societies.

Notes from the Field

Explaining the Research to Potential Participants

Access to the people relevant to our research is dependent on the experiences of the participants met during the first point of contact and subsequent interview phases of the study. Participants may shut down, be less likely to fully participate, and be less willing to return for follow-up questions or for a later wave of the study if they perceive the interviewer to be unprofessional, insincere, or overly eager to collect data. In addition, we noticed that relationship maintenance begins at the point of initial contact, when participants are given the first information about the research.

In our research project, the greatest difficulty we faced has been the recruitment of research participants. Searching and encouraging 307 individuals to interview took almost 2 years. We realized that it sometimes became necessary to employ an adaptive fieldwork design and modify the narrative we use when describing our research to potential research participants. The challenge appeared from the fact that the kind of communities we were interested in are often hidden, hard to reach; that is, no sampling frame exists for them, and because the behaviors in which they engage appeared to be at fault or marginalized politically or religiously, they generally are suspicious about participating in research. Some potential research participants reported their negative previous experience participating in interviews done with media professionals, who convoluted their narratives or violated their anonymity in the final piece, which then increased the likelihood of reporting suspicions of interviews in general. To combat the reluctance, and approach our participants with compassion, we did not want to use the mainstream labels employed to profile these groups of youngsters. Instead, in establishing contacts, building rapport with potential research participants, or gaining entry into organizations, we propose a tailored request for participation for each research participant based on the target group’s characteristics and other relevant variables. Such a flexible approach could be especially vital for qualitative research employing one-on-one interviews, as the agreement to participate in research could be considered the first step toward a more

engaging, intimate, and ethically sensitive conversation between the researcher and the participant.

After explaining the parts of the research agenda that would help research participants commit to a conversation, the interviewers can attempt to use subtle techniques to get beyond the research participants' defenses and give voice to the many who are often ridiculed or not taken seriously. Research participants, in return, might grasp the motivation of the research by examining the questions and the way we ask those questions during or after the interviews. We believe this is especially crucial for qualitative research dealing with different groups of people across borders and should increase overall participation and consent rates.

Wording of the Research Description

During their attempts to encourage research participants to take part in the study, the field researchers found that recruiting native youth with far-right ideologies was more challenging than enrolling self-identified Muslim youth in the study. For both groups, however, finding intermediaries to access to and initiate a good relationship with potential research participants seemed crucial for successful recruitment. Below, I will describe particular challenges the field researchers faced to explain why and how it was necessary to make slight changes to the way we phrased our research. The following paragraphs will explain the points of challenges the field researchers faced while promoting the research and explain how they overcame them differently for the two different subpopulations of youth.

During the process of setting up the scene for recruitment, the researcher anticipates findings and becomes aware of the emergence of new knowledge by being attuned to a sense of difference. The selection of participants must reflect the objectives of the study, allowing the researcher to find representative individuals who fit the sampling characteristics. Despite their crucial importance in qualitative research design, procedures for locating and recruiting a sample are not addressed comprehensively in research method literature (e.g., (Creswell 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2008)). Several studies examined strategies to make research appealing for individuals to agree and participate in surveys and online panels (e.g., (Busse and Fuchs 2012; Busse and Fuchs 2014; Martinsson et al. 2017)). For field researchers, however, our knowledge about ways to increase cooperation among potential participants is limited. We believe such a quest is very important as qualitative researchers spend relatively long and intimate time with their participant(s) one on one.

Starting the recruitment process, the field researchers were reminded not to use the word “radical” and asked to use the following text when recruiting potential participants:

Central to our research is the question of how young people are influenced by globalization and current (neoliberal) policies. The aim is to reach young people (18–30 years old) who are dealing with social and economic exclusion and have sympathies for movements that are somewhat withdrawn/different from mainstream society. Specifically, it concerns Muslim youth (with a Turkish or Moroccan background) who tend towards

Salafist ideas, or for whom religion plays an important role in daily life/who describe themselves as conservative Muslim youngsters, and native youth living in remote places. How do young people deal with, for example, social or economic exclusion?

The above narrative drew a lot of resistance from Muslim youngsters. Several identity labels used in our standard narration (e.g., Muslim, Salafi, migrant origin, young, conservative) made the search for self-identified Muslim research participants rather complicated. Muslim youngsters with migration backgrounds resisted being labeled conservative and questioned the researchers further about our research motivation. Especially since the label *conservative* seemed problematic. Reactions varied: “young people do not recognize themselves in this description,” “What does conservative mean?,” “So your research is also about Islamophobia?” They said they were never actually heard and that most researchers and journalists manipulated their words to show that Muslims live segregated and are a threat to European society. They argued and questioned why Muslims in Europe were always the object of research. Despite prevalently expressing their experiences of discrimination, they resisted being approached as the *objects* of racism and discrimination in our first interactions. Besides, we sometimes realized that the reference to Islam could dampen down some individuals’ enthusiasm in their desire to participate in the research. Several Muslim youngsters even expressed their desires to read our research results later, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of curiosity as much as a manifestation of mistrust. The field researchers initially responded to such a challenge by emphasizing that the research was about self-identification, and that they wanted to distance themselves from labeling people. Further in the recruitment process, however, removing labels with negative connotations, such as Salafi or conservative, from the research description or referring to their hyphenated identities (e.g., Muslims from Europe, Moroccan-origin Dutch) proved to be helpful for this group. Thus, to recruit this kind of participant, we had less recourse to the question of religious affiliation than to that of their ethno-national origin. This strategy may have encouraged some future respondents to commit to the study for feeling pride in the idea of being able to speak out as representatives of their country of origin.

Similarly, the right narrative for reaching out to native youngsters turned out as an undertaking that we experienced in the field of interaction with potential research participants and intermediaries. The question of how to address and describe the group of native youngsters we were searching for without stigmatizing them did not appear to be equally problematic as it was for the Muslim youth. One reason for this could be the pride native youngsters with far-right beliefs felt with their organizational or ideological affiliations. There were only few who were hesitant to be addressed based on their right-wing political views (e.g., disliking being called a Nazi, in the process of being de-radicalized, in an exit program). The following excerpt exemplifies the emphasis on pride one feels of their ideological markers:

People here seem to feel a hatred against their own people. I don't let those insults of being racist etc.; get to me. Everybody is extremely fast irritated and annoyed, on all sides [both sides—right-wing and anti-racists—are highly sensitive]. I am proud of where I'm coming from. This is what I want to promote,

that people become more confident and proud of where they come from. That has nothing to do with politics. (20 y-o native male in Aalst, Belgium).

For our purposes, “native youth living in remote places” was not a specific characterization on its own. In our research description, we wanted to emphasize their sympathy for far-right ideology and framed their positions as “numerical minority” (Lazëri 2023) due to their beliefs. With that intention, the field researchers decided to approach the potential research participants by stating that they are looking for native youth labeled as reactionary, identitarian, and/or right-wing Eurosceptic/sovereignist. The youngsters did relate to the narrative in which we said that there is a growing group of youngsters who worry about immigration and the EU, but that their voice is often suppressed or ridiculed within the public debate. This nuanced narrative increased their response rate in return.

Wording of the Research Context

In addition to the modification in the recruitment wording, contextualizing the research by providing details about the research team and the research institution is essential when describing the study to potential participants. For Muslim youth, emphasizing the role the Turkish researchers play in this research as the grant holders and the primary investigators helped to reassure some interviewees of Turkish origin, who saw this study a means of reconnecting with the country of their parents. As for the native youth, the strategy we pursued consisted in mentioning that the study was being carried out in four different European countries and not just in their national context. This confirmed that their narratives cannot be utilized by their national political circles and/or intelligence services. Yet, we felt the need to not emphasize our funding agency and the European nature of this study because our native respondents perceived the European level not only as a guarantee of scientific seriousness but also as a less favorable framework for possible attempts at state and/or police instrumentalization.

As previously shown in research methodology literature (e.g., (Carter 2004)), sampling socially marginalized and impoverished groups without making use of intermediary figures and organizations directly working for/with them appeared to be very challenging. Personal relationships and intermediaries played a great role in obtaining interviews with respondents of the Muslim faith. It was rather more difficult to mobilize similar networks to get in touch with radical right-wing sympathizers. Intermediary organizations appeared to be very keen on taking care of the people they work with. This means protecting their privacy and preventing them from being exposed and portrayed in public in an unexpected or bad way. Given the responses of such organizations to our requests, many have already experienced such negative representations.

One of the field researchers found volunteering for one of those organizations that assist people living in poverty facilitated access to the target group. Through their voluntary involvement, the researcher was able to interview a number of research participants who regularly visited the organization and received assistance. Their role consisted of welcoming families with children to the small playground around

which the organization's building is constructed. In fact, this particular community setting allowed this particular researcher to access single mothers aligned with right-wing ideologies. Studies of the right overwhelmingly focus on men (Bacchetta and Power 2013; Benevento 2023b). Therefore, this researcher's involvement with families and children benefited the overall research greatly.

Another researcher also found the political atmosphere benefitting their recruitment efforts. The campaign for the municipal elections undeniably facilitated their meeting with political activists, including members of the far-right political parties. Occupied with the task of publicizing their organizations and ideologies, these individuals invited the researcher to their meetings, events, and trainings.

Conclusion

Science demands systematization and precision in all research processes. Yet, the ethics and the methods underlying research with marginalized individuals are complex and best practices are often situational. The idea of how we define and label groups and how they might speak against these might provide some interesting thoughts on how ethnic/religious categories emerge and the tensions for research, given we have to draw on categories of some type. We strongly believe that it is ethically inconsiderate for researchers to ignore the connotations of the prevailing labels society use to describe their sampling populations. Those researchers interested in expanding our understanding about individuals, who are silenced by majority societies or those who willingly position themselves close to condemned standpoints, need to also think about ways of approaching and encouraging potential research participants. Otherwise, we believe that the academic community would be making a methodological mistake by contributing to what the civilizational discourse is already doing, which is positioning groups of people further from each other. In order to overcome the difficulties of accessing and encouraging people to participate in our research, we practiced, examined, and assessed the effectiveness of a flexible recruitment strategy due to necessity but also with utmost curiosity to identify whether they would work or not. The current paper documented the development of these lessons we have taken in the process of conducting our research. Here, it is important to stress that having an ethics committee periodically reviewing our research design, modifications, updated materials gave us confidence that the deviations were minor, and our amendments were overviewed. Recurrent reporting activity and feedback from our committee members made our flexible approach feasible.

The current paper would like to also emphasize that qualitative research, in general, and in-depth interviews, in particular, can help us analyze and compare Islamist and nativist movements and eventually deconstruct radicalization. Removing identity labels from research agendas and, thus, the research setting is possible when a researcher approaches those labels with caution and makes a conscious effort to recognize individuals who would be bothered to be called by those labels. After the initial contact was successful, we discovered that European Muslim youth with migration background and native youth who support movements labeled as far-right found it worthwhile to explain their opinions in their own words. As a result,

our interviews helped us develop a thorough understanding of some particularly interesting radicalization journeys that would otherwise be overlooked. Noticing some patterns between both group members' life stories, we realized that our research was concerned with often inconspicuous individuals than their identity labels may imply, and radicalization is not necessarily an indication of *deviance*. This does not mean we ought to look away from their radical thoughts and behaviors, but understand why and how their radical expressions come to be within the context of their lives. Many of our participants who perceive themselves unnoticed or humiliated expressed gratitude for earning actual attention to their views. As a result, we would like to encourage other academics to stay curious about these two subpopulations of youth and other marginalized, singled out, and stigmatized groups, and consider interviewing as many individuals as possible in order to discover *the radicals*. In order to address the issue of searching and encouraging skeptical candidates of participants, we believe that this paper will serve as a useful starting point.

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