

## **TAKING SIDES? ISSUES OF BIAS AND PARTISANSHIP WHEN RESEARCHING SOCIO-POLITICAL CONFLICT**

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Author: Rune Ellefsen (PhD Candidate)

Affiliation: Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo, Norway.

Postal address: Department of Criminology and Sociology of law,

P.O. 6706, St. Olavs plass

NO-0130 OSLO, Norway.

Email: [rune.ellefsen@jus.uio.no](mailto:rune.ellefsen@jus.uio.no)

Phone: +47 22 85 01 28 / +47 467 99 669

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## **Taking Sides? Issues of Bias and Partisanship When Researching Socio-political Conflict**

### **ABSTRACT:**

The article unpacks the issues of bias or partisanship—and the risk of being accused of these—which confront social scientists who study socio-political conflict. Drawing on the author’s experience when conducting research on the conflict between animal liberation activists and their state and corporate adversaries in Britain (1999–2014), the article argues for a relational research approach—focusing on the interaction between contending parties, rather than study stakeholders singly—as a way to overcome challenges of taking sides when studying socio-political conflict. The debate generated by Howard Becker’s classic essay “Whose side are we on?” (1967)—now fifty years old—is used throughout the article as a point of reference for addressing the issues involved. The argument is made for constant reflexivity during research on radical social movements, and for “temporary bias” during qualitative fieldwork.

Keywords: Animal liberation protest; contentious politics; positionality; qualitative methods; reflexive social science; social movements

Word count (below): 7785.

## **Introduction**

My background in the animal rights movement raises concerns when I study conflicts over animal liberation activism. How does my background impact the research on those that I study? Compared to other scholars, those with activist backgrounds seem to face more frequent accusations of bias and partisanship. Indeed, the ways in which social scientists deal with the issue of bias and with accusations of taking sides—that is, actively supporting the opinions and positions of research participants—have important implications for both researchers and the researched (Liebling 2001). These issues are particularly acute in the study of social movements and the socio-political conflicts connected with them. Such conflicts, by definition, involve several competing actors, and the side/s in the conflict one takes as a starting point, or uses as one's main source of data, will inevitably affect how its/their perspectives are understood, and what knowledge is produced. Partiality in one's treatment of the parties involved becomes a key methodological issue in this type of research.

The article consists of four parts. The first describes the case study (the interaction between a social movement campaign and its state and private opponents in Britain) and the questions that it raises regarding bias and partisanship given my activist past. The second part, “Negotiating Antagonistic Social Worlds,” then identifies challenges inherent to the study of conflicts in which “superordinates” (e.g., criminal justice agencies) and “subordinates” (here, transgressive protestors) interact. A “relational” research approach is then suggested as a partial “solution” to overcome some of the challenges—or, at least, treat them as analytical advantages. The third and fourth parts of this article, entitled “Positionality and Self-

positioning: Researching what, how and for whom?” and “Value-neutrality and Partisanship: What and where is my standpoint?” respectively, explores issues of positionality and partisanship, and argues for constant reflexivity while studying radical social movements and “temporary bias” during qualitative fieldwork. Throughout the article, Howard Becker’s classic essay “Whose side are we on?” (1967)—and the discussions it has inspired—serve as a reference point for unpacking different dimensions of bias and partisanship, both as regards research on socio-political conflict generally, and my own research.

### **Context: Studying Interaction between Protestors and Agents of Policing**

The article is based on a research project examining the interaction in Britain between the international Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign, criminal justice agencies, and corporate actors in the course of a fifteen-year conflict, from the campaign’s inception until its end (1999–2014). From the start of my research project, the need to reflect on, and tackle, issues of bias and partisanship has been pressing, precisely because of my participation in the broader animal rights movement, and concern this has raised about whether I might merely reproduce movement narratives or be otherwise influenced by a vested interest in the animal rights cause. My closeness to the field, even though I was not active in the SHAC campaign, is thus a key methodological concern determining the issues I raise.

SHAC was launched in 1999 by grassroots activists from the British animal liberation movement. This radical movement<sup>1</sup> distinguishes itself from the mainstream animal rights movement by its willingness to engage in direct action; it favors non-institutionalized and extra-parliamentary forms of political participation, and often goes beyond what is defined as

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<sup>1</sup> According to Dearey (2010:25-26), “radicalism in the animal rights movement is similar to that of the more radicalized spectrum of the environmental movement and other radical social movements (notably radical feminism): they resist compromise and remain determined to eliminate the structures, institutions and practices associated with the targeted organizational hegemony rather than seeking to reform them from within.”

legal protest. SHAC was established with the single aim of closing down Huntingdon Life Science (HLS), Europe's biggest contract animal testing laboratory. HLS became a target because of the extensive testing and experiments on animals it conducted on behalf of other companies, including some of the world's largest corporations (e.g., GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis). Opposition to HLS involved different tactics, including a wide range of lawful forms of protest (e.g., demonstrating outside the animal testing laboratories), various forms of non-violent civil disobedience (e.g., blocking the entrance to the laboratories), and unlawful forms of clandestine direct action (such as the destruction of property). In addition to HLS itself, people behind the company, such as directors, and employees, were targeted.

The campaign achieved its greatest successes by challenging HLS directly (its premises, property and personnel), and later by targeting any person or organization linked to it. The campaigners induced over two hundred and fifty companies to sever ties with HLS. These included some of the world's wealthiest financial institutions (e.g., Citibank) and companies (e.g., Marsh). HLS was also de-listed from the London Stock Exchange in 2001, while its parent company was barred from being listed on the New York Stock Exchange in 2005—all because of the protests in the UK, USA and beyond (Adetunji and Postelnicu 2005). SHAC's short-term successes and tremendous impact eventually caused the British government to react, following organized lobbying by those who had been targeted. The government subsequently stepped in, using the arm of the criminal justice system to aid HLS. At the same time, SHAC's achievements inspired other activists and enabled the campaign to grow and spread internationally.

The reach and impact of SHAC was unprecedented in the history of the international animal liberation movement. The counter-responses subsequently employed by criminal justice agencies and corporations, however, were also unprecedented in the history of the movement's operation in liberal democracies (Ellefsen 2016a). Authorities, police agencies

and corporations across Europe and the US eventually tightened their cooperative efforts to thwart the campaign and dismantle it. Between 2008 and 2014, 13 core organizers of SHAC UK were thus given custodial sentences totaling 74 years (CPS Wessex 2014; Mills 2012). In addition, a number of campaigners were given punishments, including custodial sentences, community service, fines and Anti-Social Behavior Orders (ASBOs), for their involvement in the SHAC campaign. Some were even given indefinite ASBOs, which banned them from any involvement in campaigns against HLS for the rest of their lives (Mills 2012:257). A number of activists were imprisoned because of their unlawful actions against HLS: Donald Currie, for example, received a twelve-year sentence in 2006 (BBC 2006). After years of growing repression, the SHAC UK organization announced the end of the campaign in 2014.

The particular nature of the SHAC campaign, and its interaction with state and private adversaries, makes it a worthwhile object of study for both criminologists and social movement scholars. It demonstrates how activists fighting for species justice and animal rights (or liberation) disrupted a wealthy transnational corporation profiting from legalized animal abuse and harm (see, e.g., Nurse 2013). The SHAC campaign and the reactions thereto also reveals the extent to which the state will respond when activists succeed in threatening the interests—and very existence—of a wealthy transnational corporation that is responsible for harm. Understanding the strategy of disruptive protest developed by the SHAC campaigners, and its impact, is fundamental to understanding the wave of political repression that was unleashed.<sup>2</sup>

Studying the conflict surrounding SHAC, and seeking to examine the protestors' dynamic interaction with adversaries, has involved empirical investigation of a specific process of criminalization (the creative use of pre-existing and new policing tools to tackle a

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<sup>2</sup> Following Earl (2011), I use the word *repression* to mean a specific type of social control whose purpose is to prevent or diminish protest, activism and social movements. Throughout the article, the terms *repression* and *protest policing* are used interchangeably to refer to state and private efforts to control social movement protest.

specific social movement campaign). Importantly, the study also explores the way social movement campaigners react, adapt, and try to resist state control measures, and maps out the impact and outcome of a concerted crackdown on a particular social movement campaign (see Ellefsen 2016a, 2016b). The qualitative research design employed to analyze these and other aspects of the conflict involved a triangulation of methods and data sources to obtain contrasting perspectives on the same issues. The data were collected in England in 2013 and 2014, through interviews, trial observation and participatory fieldwork.

### **Negotiating Antagonistic Social Worlds**

The SHAC case study explores interaction between collective actors in conflicting positions: transgressive protestors (subordinates) and their state and corporate adversaries (superordinates). My interviews and participant observation were mostly with protestors, while other types of data were gathered from their adversaries. Two questions arose during my research: (1) is it possible to have the same degree of sensitivity towards two (or more) parties to a conflict; and (2) how can several stakeholders be included in the study to enhance understanding of the overall conflict? As noted above, Becker (1967) provides a useful starting point.

Becker's (1967) concept of *hierarchy of credibility* points to the difficulty of giving attention to the perspectives of both the superordinates and the subordinates in a conflict. He also underlines specific challenges for research in politicized situations:

When we do research in a political situation we are in double jeopardy, for the spokesmen of both involved groups will be sensitive to the implications of our work. Since they propose openly conflicting definitions of reality, our statement of our problem is in itself likely to call into question and make problematic, at least for the purposes of our research, one or the other definition. And our results will do the same (Becker 1967:244).

In such situations, the hierarchy of credibility implies that the opposing parties are both likely to accuse the researcher of bias if their adversary is given “too much” attention. Gouldner (1968) summarizes Becker’s position as follows: no matter what perspective a sociologist takes, his work must be written from either the standpoint of subordinates or superordinates. According to Gouldner, one cannot do justice to both. Is this really the only possible view? As Hammersley points out, however, Becker’s (1967:245) actual assertion is that “there is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one or another way.” But here bias is understood in a *mild* sense—as the inability to grant equal consideration to all parties in the research field, which is an underlying methodological issue in any social research. When researching socio-political conflict, including several stakeholders can enable one to better understand the conflict. While this might involve both personal and cognitive challenges for the researcher, who has to maneuver between antagonistic worldviews and social groups, including several conflicting stakeholders in the study is nonetheless fundamental to overcome a one-sided focus, and to capture the overall dynamics of the conflict.

In a critique of another of Becker’s works, *The Outsiders* (1963), and of labeling theory, more generally, Gouldner (1968) frames Becker’s perspective as one in which the process of making someone, some group or some thing “deviant” (e.g., the criminalization and marginalization of a specific protest group) cannot be understood unless deviants, and rule-making and rule-enforcing procedures or persons, are studied together. From this, the question of from whose side one should explore the issues follows. But such an interpretation treats Becker’s argument very narrowly. Becker (1967:247) actually advocates understanding *both* perspectives—those of both superordinates and subordinates—while calling for the use of “theoretical and technical resources to avoid the distortions that might be introduced into



our work.” Becker’s point rather seems to be that one can never do *equal justice* to both parties’ perspectives (Hammersley 2001).

I have included the perspectives of, and data from, several contending actors in my research, and the conflict is marked by clear lines of division and “Us-vs.-Them” rationales. When moving between (and among) the opposing parties to collect data, I frequently felt that my own outlook was being influenced by the narrative that I was currently hearing. And, indeed, when one shifts between opposing sources of data, the cognitive challenge of balancing contradictory worldviews can be profound. For example, when I moved from analyzing hostile mainstream media stories about transgressive animal liberation protestors to participant observation among the same protestors, I experienced a temporary sense of confusion because opposing narratives representing colliding worldviews and rationales, temporarily distorted my understandings.

It is precisely these shifts between clashing sources of information, however, and one’s efforts to negotiate them, which can obviate the limitations of contemplating only one side. I discovered that both data sources had their own logic and way of making sense of reality that was plausible and “true” from the perspective of the teller. In a constructionist sense, then, I was not interested in who was “right” but rather in how the battle between different narratives accompanied the material conflict between protestors and agents of repression (see e.g., Henry and Milovanovic 1999).

In general, including both parties to a conflict in one’s research, and exposing their opposing narratives, can strengthen one’s overall understanding of the issues and dynamics at play (see, e.g., Satterfield 2002). Liebling (2001) writes that synthesis between different or competing perspectives sharpens the researcher’s focus, and that the struggle to balance them can be a crucial part of his or her research. Wahlström (2011:60-61) puts forward a similar view in his study of the nature of the interactions between police and protestors: “I would

argue that it is actually one of the main advantages of studying two opposing groups, that confrontation with contradictory perspectives on the same events can be used by the researcher as a corrective for becoming caught in either life-world.” Wahlström acknowledges the cognitive challenge of this approach when he states that this advantage also entails an “occasional sense of schizophrenia” (Wahlström 2011:61). This is another way of describing the “existential disorientation” (Ferrell and Hamm 1998) referred to above—something I felt strongly when moving between data from opposing parties to the conflict. Despite the discomfort that accompanies such a shift, exploring the conflict from several antagonistic perspectives can lead to a better understanding of the conflict as a whole. In my research, the concurrent understandings of the opposing parties repeatedly surprised me: they gave very similar descriptions of key events and turning points in the fifteen-year conflict. When looking back on this, it becomes clear just how strikingly similar were the understandings of how and why the conflict evolved. These concurrent descriptions thus strengthened the data, as antagonistic actors confirmed what the key elements of the conflict were.

Researching the repression of a social movement without including its opponents would exclude elements crucial to understanding it. While this is true in general, it was particularly apropos in the context of the SHAC campaign, which emerged, developed, and died through dynamic interaction and relationships with its adversaries. The actions of protestors against HLS, resulted in a range of reactions by state agencies (see della Porta 2014). Such reactions led to the radicalization of some and the demobilization of others; some, who remained involved in the movement, changed their tactics (see, e.g., della Porta & Diani 2006: 189). If, as Tarrow (2011:33) suggests, that we cannot understand or explain the outcome of any conflict (episode of contention) “by focusing on what a single social movement does at a given moment in time,” political challengers, such as SHAC, must be

seen in relation to those they challenge and to influential allies, third parties, and the forces of order (Tilly 2006).

In their classic text on contentious politics, entitled *Dynamics of contention*, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001:xvii) propose a research approach they call *relational*, arguing that “the area of contentious politics will profit most from systematic attention to interaction among actors, institutions, and streams of contentious politics.” This relational approach explicitly focuses on “social interaction as the site in which identities form, coalesce, split and transform and intersect with other processes”—such as mobilization and repression (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001: 58). One of the most distinctive contributions of this approach to the study of social movements—and of collective action more broadly—is the development of a research perspective for studying conflict and contention over time, where interactions between stakeholders are a central part of the focus (Diani 2007). This orientation differs substantially from static perspectives that study stakeholders singly, thus ignoring the driving role of the reciprocal relationship between the contenders.

In a relational approach (see, e.g., Emirbayer 1997 for more on *relational sociology*) the life cycle of the conflict is examined as a process—whereby “processes” refer to “actions of some kind associated with other actions and reactions, often expressed in some sort of reciprocal relationship” (Taylor and Horgan 2012:130). Actions can involve both individuals and groups that are related to each other, as well as events (clusters of action-reaction) and chains of events. Inspired by this approach, my study of the conflict between SHAC and HLS investigated the dynamic interaction between animal liberation movement activists, on the one hand, and their opponents (criminal justice agencies and representatives of the targeted companies) on the other.

As suggested throughout this section, employing a relational approach that investigates protest by studying the relations and interaction between activists and their

opponents calls for the inclusion of data from several stakeholders. This dynamic interplay among the contending parties is important, in and of itself, for understanding (and explaining) the conflict, but it also helps reveal how the tactics employed by stakeholders develop over time as a result of the interaction. Adopting a relational approach in my study of SHAC, thus turned some of the challenges into *advantages*, and offered—if not a “solution” to some of the problems of taking sides—then, at least, a *resolution*, to the challenge of researching a socio-political conflict where I had much greater empathy for one of the sides. . Other issues remain unresolved, however, such as those pertaining to positionality, value-neutrality and partisanship. I consider these in the next two parts of this article

### **Positionality and Self-positioning: Researching what, how and for whom?**

The *entire act* of scientific study is oriented and shaped by the underlying picture of the empirical world that is used. This picture sets the selection and formulation of problems, the determination of what are data, the means to be used in getting the data, the kinds of relations sought between data, and the forms in which propositions are cast [...] The unavoidable task of genuine methodological treatment is to identify and assess these premises. (Blumer 1969:24-25)

Blumer suggests that the researcher’s position and outlook affects his/her research questions, methodologies, analysis and conclusions. My own background in—and experiences with—social movement participation, mainly in the animal rights movement, has had an even broader impact beyond my study of SHAC, affecting my very decisions regarding higher education and my views on the role of the academic, and of social sciences in general. While seeing the obvious necessity and strength of various kinds of academic profiles, I have always been attracted by critical approaches which have relevance, and are accessible, to people outside the academic sphere. It was this type of scholarly work that initially aroused my interest in the fields of criminology and the sociology of law.

Blumer's statement above, however, does not raise the question of *what* personal values I might have, but *how* they may play a part in the construction of my research, and in its conclusions. My activist background has, for example, offered advantages in terms of easier access to SHAC activists—and of obtaining their confidence—while that same closeness to the field is an inherent challenge to my research both in terms of gaining industry and government trust and in analyzing my findings. Essentially, these are questions of value-neutrality, and one must, according to Risjord (2014), ask what sort of values are in play and how do they influence our research. One way in which our values and preferences are made manifest is in the choice of analytical tools and theoretical perspectives.

The ways in which a discipline conceptualizes the world it studies can change that world (Harding 2009). This is the avowed assumption of *standpoint theorists*, who take the position of a particular social group, such as women, for example, claiming that this offers epistemic advantages that can help improve women's situation and standing in society. Much published research, however, does not explicitly state, or otherwise discuss, why a particular analytical scheme or specific conceptual tools are chosen, or what implications the use of politicized concepts such as "extremism" or "terrorism" might have for the scholarly field, for one's self-positioning, and for those being studied. When studying people who either identify as political radicals or who are labeled "deviants," "extremists" or "fanatics," it is crucial to reflect on the analytical concepts chosen because they have serious implications, particularly for those being researched.

In 2006, SHAC was branded a "terrorist organization" in the United States under the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act. Activists from SHAC in the UK—who were the main subjects of my study—were described as "dangerous animal rights extremists" in the media, while the term "domestic extremism" was used by the UK government and police. In such a terrain, the naming and labeling of a group's ideology and actions became important and

consequential political acts in their own right—part of what we as researchers must eventually explain (see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).

The words “extremist,” “fanatic” and “terrorist” have long been included in the inventory of contested terms in the social sciences, and they need to be avoided by scholars who do not wish to essentialize actors (Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi 2015; see also Brisman 2008, in press). Much criminology is more oriented towards developing security policies than gaining a scientific understanding of a phenomenon (see, e.g., McClanahan and Wall 2016; Rundhovde, this issue; Shearing 2015; Wall and McClanahan 2015). In contrast to the criminology that aligns with state interests, critical criminology and social movement literature offers more neutral concepts for understanding and explaining protest, and has thus proved helpful for conceptualizing and analyzing the SHAC campaign, without essentializing in this way those being researched. Rather than using the problematic “extremism” concept, for example, I sought to understand the praxis of SHAC by encompassing its diversity with respect to its tactics and its various groups involved, along different scales and dimensions, thus gaining more nuanced knowledge than one might by accepting the description offered by a simplified label.

The choice of analytical concepts has internal and external implications for research. Internally, the implications concern what constitutes good science; a conceptual and methodological framework can be chosen according to what is most likely to help answer the main research question. External to the research process are the implications of the published research itself, now outside the researcher’s control, where the knowledge it offers might be used by the government as legitimation for harsher penalties—in this case, for investigating, apprehending, prosecuting and sanctioning radical animal rights activists. The findings, when disseminated in the form of a journal article or other publication, can also increase the marginalization of vulnerable groups. The extent to which the research produces useful

knowledge—to the police and law enforcement agencies, or to the radical movement(s)—will depend on how the researcher positions himself or herself, in combination with the research design, questions and choice of theoretical tools. Judging by my own research, I would argue that employing a *relational* research approach, as introduced in the previous part, can help produce knowledge that could be useful to all the parties covered by the study, without necessarily privileging any particular one. But obviously, there is no guarantee. The aims and position of the researcher will inevitably influence whoever finds the knowledge useful, and parts of my own research are probably of greater interest to academics, than to protestors or the police. Further aspects of this self-positioning, and the structural pressures that impact researchers' positionality, are explored below.

The ways in which researchers position themselves by their choice of scholarly topics, and the traditions they follow, connect to specific issues of self-positioning within academia. As Croteau (2005:30) observes, “Mainstream research addressing mild policy reforms, rather than work that engages with concrete and strategic issues connected to specific contemporary struggles, is better able to compete for major funding and, therefore, is more likely to be a route to academic success.” In other words, certain types of research are more likely to further an academic career. Self-positioning within the academic environment thus involves a negotiation of structural and personal traits, with scholars under pressure to make certain choices if they want to gain funding and secure sustained employment. A set of structural conditions and contextual norms thus has an influence on what will appear viable and attractive to researchers in the course of their academic careers. These influences form part of what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as *doxa*—the undiscussed, undisputed and taken-for-granted. A reflexive social science seeks to acknowledge explicitly and reflect openly on how these influences impact research, which is something frequently under-explored—and often ignored—in social science. Questions about bias and taking sides are seemingly more

frequently directed at scholars defining themselves as part of a critical tradition, those with an activist background, or who make their standpoint (in the various meanings of the word) clear. But the same demand for reflection on one's values and sympathies, as well as on the influences of structural pressures and contextual norms, must be addressed by all researchers, whether they are conflict- or consensus-oriented or profess no particular orientation in their approach.

Warnings about “going native” relate to the possible pitfalls of adopting the worldview of research participants. One should, however, also strive to detach oneself temporarily from “native assumptions”—one's own culturally ingrained values and norms, which might differ greatly from what is taken for granted by those being studied. This implies that the inability to set aside, or critically reflect on, one's own values and cultural lenses should be seen as a risk of comparable gravity to that of “going native.” Attempting to detach oneself temporarily from one's values, particularly during fieldwork, can thus be a useful way to reflect on how one's cultural norms impact the research. Researchers are exposed to influences of which they are not necessarily aware, and this affects how they proceed (Prieur 2002b). That is the reason why Bourdieu, like Dorothy E. Smith (2005), demands that the position of the observer (the researcher) should be the object of *the same kind of critical analysis* we employ when investigating *other objects or people* (see Widerberg 2008, for a discussion). Such reflexivity is particularly important when studying radical social movements, as Milan (2014) argues, to avoid ethical and analytical pitfalls: both so that research participants are not negatively affected, and to help make more conscious choices during research.

### **Value-neutrality and Partisanship: What and where is the researcher's standpoint?**

Let me return now to Becker (1967), who questions whether a truly objective social science, in the positivist sense, is an attainable—or even *desirable*—goal. Many now accept



that researchers cannot avoid making assumptions about the world—assumptions that have not been independently tested and which will shape their work in fundamental ways (Hammersley 2000). The issues of bias and taking sides thus remain important to qualitative and ethnographic researchers. In his influential essay, Becker (1967) asserts the impossibility of value-neutrality for social scientists. But what does this really mean for researchers today—some fifty years after the fact? And what are the implications of accepting Becker’s position regarding values and their influence on research?

Objectivity could mean maximizing neutrality (Harding 2004) or minimizing subjectivity (Cousin 2010), but researchers cannot be “objective” or “neutral” in the sense that their scientific inquiry is not influenced, or in some way affected, by their position—because all knowledge is situated, in the sense that it is always produced from a specific position, and thus represents one specific view of the world (Smith 2004). These assumptions represent a key concern of the so called “reflexive turn” (Foley 2002), which refers to the shift away from focusing on minimizing subjectivity to thinking more about how to bring oneself into the research process by acknowledging that “our knowledge is always mediated and interpreted from a particular stance and through our available language, and that we should own up to this in explicit ways” (Cousin 2010:10).

It bears mention that choosing a standpoint *from which to start empirical exploration* should be seen as something different from *taking sides in terms of sympathies and partisanship*. By “standpoint,” I mean an initial position in an empirical exploration, as understood within the research program of institutional ethnography (see, e.g., Smith 2005). Institutional ethnography begins with, but is not limited to, locating a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which that order will be explored (Smith 2005).

I started my exploration among activists, but did not stop there, or limit my data to them. Rather I started with activists because I felt an affinity to and for them, but also to locate the actions and actors they experienced as crucial in supporting them, affecting them, and trying to dismantle their campaign. Here, the standpoint represented the starting point from where initial explication began and evolved to include their adversaries. This contrasts with the more avowedly partisan approaches of feminist (or other) “standpoint theory,” which prioritizes a specific oppressed or stigmatized group (e.g., women), often arguing that this offers epistemic advantages<sup>3</sup> and a commitment to bringing about more just societies (see, e.g., Sollund this issue). Acknowledging the situated nature of knowledge production and the researcher’s unavoidable impact on the research process does not mean a resigned acceptance of partisanship—of doing research in such a way as to serve some (e.g., political) cause (Hammersley 2001) or biased point of view.

Bias is generally regarded as something to be avoided; it may be defined as “any systematic deviation from validity, or to some deformation of research practice that produces such deviation” (Hammersley 2000:152). One reading of Becker—that of Hammersley (2001)—interprets “bias” as “a relative and contingent matter which depends on who is in power and the stance the researcher takes towards them.” This implies bias is a product of the *research situation* rather than a feature of the *researcher’s work itself* (Hammersley 2001) and points to conditions external to the researcher. This is somewhat different from what is often meant when a charge of bias is leveled, such as when a researcher selects data to fit a preconceived agenda (Risjord 2014). The ambiguity of the concept of bias reflects inherent challenges in Becker’s article because many readers take it to justify taking sides in the partisan sense.

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<sup>3</sup> “Standpoint theories” map how an oppressed group’s social or political disadvantage “can be turned into an epistemological, scientific and political advantage” (Harding 2004:7-8).

Hammersley suggests that Becker was in fact “not arguing that researchers must choose which side they are on in such a way as to serve it” (2001:99–100). In qualitative and ethnographic research, it is not possible to give equal consideration and attention to all parties, perspectives and positions. Thus, a measure of choice and prioritization is unavoidable, without necessarily being partisan. This also applies to a relational research approach to socio-political conflict, which includes several contending actors. For example, in my study, the amount of data from activists slightly exceeds that of their adversaries. Hammersley (2001) suspects that Becker considers sociological research as politically partisan in its *effects*—with such an impact being an inadvertent (yet desirable) by-product of a sound scientific approach—and not the result of the data-gathering process. Becker, according to Hammersley, would not favor this latter form of political partisanship. Hammersley’s reading stands stark contrast to that of Gouldner (1968), who asserts that Becker and others comprising the “Chicago School” clearly adopt a standpoint identifying with deviant rather than “respectable” society. In defense of Becker, one should acknowledge that making one’s standpoint(s) explicit does not mean bias or partisanship in favor of one group over another. Even though I began my research by studying activists, this does not mean that I adopted their worldview or sought to use my position as a researcher to promote their perspectives and ideologies. Rather, the aim was to understand their perspectives and opportunities and constraints for effective protest.

In a response to Becker’s (1967) essay, Liebling (2001) distinguishes two types of value-neutrality: *theory-neutrality* (our vision of “what is”) and *value-neutrality* (our vision of “what ought to be”). The latter is closer to what is frequently associated with the problems of taking sides and normativity. Liebling claims our vision of “what ought to be” can to some degree be suspended, and that setting it aside and letting the data speak for itself may be an even more effective way to contribute to what “ought to be.” Liebling thus lends support to

Becker's argument regarding the non-neutrality of research, not so much on the grounds that the researcher's values impact the research, but that the consequences of its publication may "have value."

Both Hammersley and Liebling separate the researcher and the research process from its consequences, claiming research *might* and sometimes *ought* to point to some values or positions in its effects. Research might have value-laden political impact after it has been published, but that is a less controversial and fundamentally different form of value than that internal to the researcher and the research process.

Closely linked to questions of value-neutrality, partisanship and bias is the accusation made against researchers that they lack distance from research participants. This brings us to the question, addressed below, which has been a constant concern in my own research: Where should the researcher draw the line between a closeness that is desirable, because it is a prerequisite for in-depth understanding, and over-involvement and lack of distance?

The question of whether a researcher has "gone native" is another aspect of bias and taking sides, and relates to the balancing of closeness to and distance from research participants. The desired level of closeness or distance *can*—and in the view of many scholars *ought* to—vary dramatically throughout the various parts of a research project. Researchers should even *strive* for "temporary bias" during such phases of fieldwork as participant observation. As Ferrell and Hamm (1998:8) argue, "effective field research demands that the researcher be submerged in the situated logic and emotion of [...] deviance, and thus be willing to abandon in part the security of pre-existing personal and professional identities." In this sense, they contend, engaged field research does not just risk existential disorientation, "it all but guarantees it" (Ferrell and Hamm 1998:8). When researchers submerge themselves in the life worlds of their research subjects and experience "existential disorientation," are they

not in great risk of going native? And what challenges and analytical advantages does this type of closeness entail?

Liebling (2001:475) also sees the advantages of such deep engagement during fieldwork: “The more affective the research, in terms of shared feelings and experiences, the better the fieldwork gets done on the whole.” But when the analysis and write-up phases begin, the deep engagement should be reduced, as “[t]he question of what happens next and how the data are handled is another matter, requiring a little more distance.”

Prieur expresses a similar view when describing her ethnographic fieldwork among transsexual men in Mexico. She explains the importance of her participant observation in enabling her to gain more from subsequent interviews with the same men. It helped her understand what research participants were hesitant to talk about by interpreting their body language. Her ethnographic fieldwork thus resulted in a more solid foundation (understanding) for conducting interviews. It offered a stronger basis for critically assessing what was later being said during interviews. When discussing whether closeness (or distance) represents a problem in fieldwork, Prieur thus emphasizes the paradox that it was the initial closeness to the daily lives of those she studied that enabled her to gain a critical distance when subsequently conducting and analyzing the interviews (Prieur 2002a). My participant observation among, and interviews with, SHAC activists enabled me to have a deeper understanding of their experiences and praxis, while providing details I could not obtain through interviews alone. My participant observation, in particular, also brought me closer to the activists, and this resulted in a deeper insight I could develop, in later interviews.

Prieur takes issue with the assertion in *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Hammersley and Atkinson 1987) that distance is a prerequisite for being able to “offer more than autobiographical accounts” (quoted in Prieur 2002a). She contends that a researcher’s

distance from his or her research subjects can be a source of naiveté and can lead to the erroneous belief that one knows more about the research subjects than may actually be the case. She further maintains that, in her research, *knowing* required a degree of empathy with—and closeness to—the research participants.

Sensitivity towards research participants—and deeper understanding of them—are hard to achieve without getting to know them and their lived experience. Empathy is essential to having a real chance of putting oneself in the research participant's place. Critical analysis is important, but this must come after a level of understanding has been achieved (see Prieur 2002a). Closeness is thus an advantage during ethnographic fieldwork, but a level of distance should be reestablished at the analytical stage. Remaining “a native” during analysis and writing is detrimental to the quality of the research (Prieur 2002a:148). In the same vein, Gouldner (1975, quoted in Liebling 2001) contends: “It is only when we have a standpoint somewhat different from the [research] participants that it becomes possible to do justice to their standpoint.” From my research on SHAC, I would argue that a relational research approach can help attain a middle ground position, separate from the positions and narratives of the distinct groups of research participants.

In sum, Ferrell and Hamm (1998), Liebling (2001) and Prieur (2002) all consider closeness and “temporary bias” to be necessary for a proper understanding of the people being researched, while insisting that such closeness is beneficial only in one phase of the research process. My own research has led me to agree with these scholars' positions.

## **Conclusion**

This article, using the example of a case study of the interaction of social movement campaigners with state and corporate adversaries in Britain, has attempted to unpack issues

relating to bias and taking sides for the researcher conducting qualitative research on socio-political conflict. The article has argued that a *relational research approach* can be employed—one that concentrates on various dimensions of contending parties’ interaction over time. This type of dynamic approach, emphasizing the contradictory views of the various actors, can bring about a better understanding of the overall conflict, and contrasts with static research perspectives that study actors singly. As a researcher with an activist background in the animal rights movement, I found the relational approach particularly helpful as a way to tackle various methodological concerns arising from my closeness to the field I was studying.

Throughout the article, the debate generated by Becker’s classic essay “Whose side are we on?” has served as a reference point to explore the challenges of research in politicized situations where several actors are in contention, as well as to flesh out the different dimensions of bias and partisanship. The article has also argued for “temporary bias” during fieldwork, so as to gain a better understanding of the worldviews and experiences of research participants. At the same time, the need for reflexivity throughout the research process has been emphasized. Such reflexivity and temporal bias not only has implications for the scientific inquiry and those being researched, but involves explicitly self-critical (reflexive) practices that may well influence the researcher’s view of both conventional and deviant social practices.

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