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Words of "terro": insights from qualitative fieldwork among radicalized prisoners

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ABSTRACT
The concept of radicalization has become a focal point of scrutiny in both the media and academia. For almost a decade, scholars have emphasized the ongoing empirical shortcomings in this field, which has primarily relied on secondary data and theoretical speculation. While recent research has begun to address these gaps, critical epistemological engagement remains limited. This is particularly true given the 'reflexive turn' inspired by post-positivist approaches and the call for the decolonization of the social sciences, which emphasizes the importance of examining researchers' positionality, privilege, and potential complicity in reproducing gendered and racial hierarchies. Such reflections are particularly necessary in a research area where participants are often male, racialized, and socio-economically marginalized. This paper contributes to filling this void by drawing on insights from an 18-month empirical study of detainees convicted of terrorism or labelled as radicalized by penal institutions. We examine the negotiation processes required to gain access to detention centers, analyze the impact of surveillance and carceral protocols on our research practices, and reflect on the methodological and epistemological recalibrations undertaken throughout the project. In doing so, we advance a reflexive account of radicalization research that foregrounds the entanglement of knowledge production, power, and positionality.

KEYWORDS: Fieldwork, Prison, Positionality, Reflexivity, Radicalization

'Radicalization' has become a focal point, with a plethora of media and academic writings on the subject (McLaughlin, 2024; Peels, 2023). This is despite many researchers pointing out the field's theoretical (Fadil et al., 2019; Kundnani, 2012) and empirical (Dawson, 2019; Horgan, 2011; Jackson et al., 2015; Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013; Nilsson, 2018; Sageman, 2018) shortcomings. However, contemporary research has begun to address these issues (Atran, 2011; Robert & Kaya, 2023). Yet, despite the 'reflexive turn' prompted by the rise of post-positivism (Hamati-Ataya, 2013) and the simultaneous calls for the decolonization of the social sciences (Reiter, 2022), which urge researchers to reflect on their position and privilege (Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021), as well

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as to consider their potential involvement in perpetuating racial and gender hierarchies (Behl, 2017), epistemological enquiries remain rare in radicalization and terrorism studies (Ajil, 2023; Schuurman, 2020). Our research aims to address this gap by elaborating on the negotiation processes involved in accessing detention centres, analyzing the impact of surveillance and detention protocols on our investigative processes, and discussing the methodological and reflective adjustments made to our research project.

Our study draws on an 18-month empirical inquiry, involving spending one to three days a month with individuals imprisoned for terrorism-related offences or labelled as 'radical' by penal authorities in various Belgian prisons between 2018 and 2019. This was complemented by semi-structured interviews with detention centre staff and legal counsels as well as the systematic consultation of inmates' prison records. As social scientists with extensive fieldwork experience in debates related to the integration of Islam in Belgium, we were struck by the emotional and almost irrational analysis of the 2016 Brussels attacks by the public authorities at the time. Consequently, one of our research aims was to delineate the personal trajectories of our interviewees, emphasizing the critical junctures that led to their alignment with jihadist ideology or their identification as such by legal and penal establishments. A second objective was to evaluate the effect of Belgian deradicalization policies on social cohesion and freedoms, including their impact on the social, penal, prison, and post-prison experiences and trajectories of prisoners deemed to be 'radicalized'. Reflexivity in the context of radicalization research is an epistemological practice aimed at acknowledging how researchers' positionality, privilege, and institutional affiliations shape knowledge production (Kapinga et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2020). It is also an ethical imperative that advocates for greater transparency. Without reflexivity, scholarship risks reproducing the hierarchies and exclusions from which its participants suffer, thereby exacerbating their marginalization (Huizinga, 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). By foregrounding reflexive enquiry, researchers can account more carefully for the asymmetrical power relations embedded in fieldwork encounters, mitigate the risk of reinforcing structural inequalities, and ensure that knowledge production remains attentive to the vulnerabilities and lived realities of participants in studies of this kind (Genova & Zontini, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2022). This paper explores how reflexivity can serve both as an epistemological tool and an ethical imperative in radicalization research involving vulnerable populations. How do researchers' positionalities and institutional affiliations shape access, interactions, and data collection in carceral settings? How can reflexive practices mitigate the reproduction of structural inequalities faced by racialized and marginalized detainees? What methodological recalibrations emerge from reflexive engagement in contexts where participants are subject to heightened surveillance and control? By addressing these questions, this paper advances a more reflexive and ethically grounded understanding of radicalization research and provides a framework for future studies to navigate power, vulnerability, and emotion in similarly sensitive contexts.

Methodological and reflexive outputs in prison and radicalization research

The first studies dedicated to prisons emerged in the United States in the 1940s, viewing them as distinct societies with their own structures and functions (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958). However, it wasn't until the 1990s that a research movement developed in Europe that considered the carceral universe not merely as an object of study, but as a specific research context (Rostaing, 2006). This encouraged more diverse approaches (Faugeron et al., 2006). Despite some concerns about their marginalization since their heyday (Wacquant, 2002), ethnographic methods have had a significant impact on prison sociology (Rowe, 2014). As Winfield (2022, pp. 138–139) states,

“within the critical and postmodern paradigms, ethnographers were no longer seen as, or encouraged to be, objective and detached authorities whose own emotions, life histories and identity characteristics did not impact the research process”. Reflexivity is now a well-established tradition in many areas of contemporary ethnographic research (Rowe, 2014), and a strong body of literature exists on the methodology and reflexivity of prison research (Drake et al., 2015; Liebling, 1999; Newman, 1958). Scholarly narratives shed light on the motivations behind inmates' consent to interviews (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023; Martos-García et al., 2022), approaches to collecting sensitive data (Bourne & Robson, 2015), how to navigate power imbalances (Gibson-Light & Seim, 2020; Rowe, 2014), and how to maintain confidentiality in scrutinized settings (Crewe & Ievins, 2015; Quina et al., 2007; Roberts & Indermaur, 2008). Prisons remain 'methodological landmines' due to their restrictive environments and the vulnerability of their populations (Woodbridge, 2025), and additional ethnographic accounts have discussed researcher reflexivity and positionality, focusing on gender (Crewe, 2014; Maguire, 2021;) and ethnic and/or religious backgrounds (Quraishi et al., 2022).

However, the field of radicalization and terrorism studies presents a contrasting landscape, since ethnography has a much more recent history in terrorism research (Esholdt & Jørgensen, 2021a). Despite the introduction of qualitative methods that allow to take a step back from relying almost exclusively on secondary sources (Badurdeen, 2018; Chantraine and Scheer, 2021; Reynolds, 2012; Smyth, 2009; Stump and Dixit, 2012), methodological and reflexive contributions remain scarce (Ajil, 2023; Esholdt and Jørgensen, 2021a; Schuurman, 2020). These contributions have yet to stimulate a systematic discourse on these issues among experts in the field (Castro e Almeida and Harris, 2021). As Esholdt and Jørgensen (2021a: p. 433) state, the vast majority of methodological contributions in the field of radicalization involve overviews of research design and data collection, or guidelines on conducting interviews with terrorists. Of particular concern is the lack of critical engagement with positionality in a research area where respondents are predominantly male, racialized, and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (de Galembert, 2020; Fassin, 2015), while researchers are typically "white/Western/bourgeois/heterosexual" (Chukwuma, 2024, p. 855). The marginalization of discussions around positionality and reflexivity in research on radicalization trajectories reintroduces the archaic positivist view of the researcher as being neutral and almost transparent. These pervasive issues surrounding the conditions of qualitative research production related to radicalization processes hinder the scholarly imperative for transparency and replicability (Schmidt, 2021). Ajil (2023, p. 75) offers several explanations for this, including “the difficulty of gaining field access, a reticence to provide interviewees with a potential platform to publicize their ideas or whitewash their image, apprehensions that interviewing as a social practice may be seen as complicity or collusion, fear of legal consequences of engaging with offenders, doubts about interviewees' veracity, and a general aversion to fieldwork”.

In this paper, we intend to explore how particular issues, such as access to the field, our positionality, and the peculiar prison environment, affected the research process. We will do so by providing multiple concrete examples from our fieldwork and problematizing aspects of research in practice, particularly the role of gatekeepers, questions related to written informed consent, and interview dynamics and reciprocity. Finally, we will highlight several points that we hope will contribute to ongoing discussions about the practicalities and possibilities of conducting respectful research in prison contexts.

Method

When we first entered the large room housing the penal files of all the detainees at the detention centre — including a wing for individuals convicted of involvement with terrorist groups — we were immediately struck by an imposing red file. Emblazoned across the front page in black marker was the word 'TERRO'. This conspicuous labelling, which was not observed on the files of other detainees, retrospectively seemed to underscore the distinct penal treatment afforded to this prisoner category. It also foreshadowed the challenges we would face in conducting research in this field, difficulties stemming as much from the subject's inherent nature as from the research context.

Its very nature makes prison a unique place of investigation: a closed, monitored environment with a heavy atmosphere (Tilley, 1998). Many scholars have highlighted the difficulties of collecting qualitative data in prisons, with accessibility being a common concern. Gibson-Light and Seim (2020, p. 667) state that prisoners are “doubly walled-off by cement and bureaucracy”.

Accessing prisons: showing your credentials

Obtaining permission to enter a prison as a researcher largely depends on the goodwill of bureaucratic figures (Gibson-Light & Seim, 2020). Gatekeepers can either facilitate or prevent fieldwork in prisons (Necef, 2020). In light of the nature of the sentences of the inmates we wished to interview, we were required to request a security accreditation from the federal intelligence services, a process that involved months of screening. Fabienne received her accreditation after a few weeks, but Corinne received no response, neither positive nor negative. After waiting for some time with no progress in the approval process despite multiple requests, we decided to take a calculated risk and contact Belgian prisons directly to begin our fieldwork. This required us to convince prison directors of the merit of our research in an initial meeting, assuring them that our activities would not disrupt the detention centre's routine operations. We leveraged Fabienne's established reputation; she was among the first to study radicalization in Belgium (Pauwels et al., 2013) and had recently completed 14 months of participatory observation in a Brussels prison from October 2014 to December 2015. This period coincided with the initial implementation of counter-terrorism public policies, enabling Fabienne to interact daily with a member of the newly formed 'Extremism Cell' and the prison administration (Brion, 2019; Brion, 2022). This research experience helped her build a trusting rapport with key security and detention stakeholders, demonstrating that access to sensitive research areas transcends bureaucratic hurdles and is also contingent upon pre-existing social ties and professional esteem.

Contrary to our expectations, and much to our relief, when we approached the prisons to collect data on the first day, they did not demand our federal accreditations. The endorsement letter from the prison director, which allowed us to enter the facility with a pen, notebook, and recorder and move between different sections of the prison, was deemed sufficient by the prison officers responsible for screening various categories of entrants (e.g., lawyers, families, visitors, medical staff, and prevention training officers) into the detention centre. As Roberts and Indermaur (2008) have observed, these front-line officers are in fact the ultimate gatekeepers to field access, navigating the complex requests and routines inherent to prison operations. In our experience, despite the director's authorization, our extended time in the field, and the formal familiarity we had established with most of the front-line officers in the span of a few weeks, we frequently found ourselves reiterating the purpose of our presence and negotiating the logistical aspects of our

observation (such as note-taking and the use of a recorder). There was therefore a certain amount of uncertainty each time we presented ourselves, despite the formal authorization we had. The requests made by front-line officers could be interpreted as a way of asserting a certain degree of discretionary power over their hierarchy (Brunetto et al., 2020; Fest et al., 2023).

Ethical considerations

Gaining entry for fieldwork involves more than just obtaining formal permissions; the willingness of potential participants is also crucial and can determine whether or not a researcher has the opportunity to make contact and collect data (Rostaing, 2012). After securing the prison directors' permission, the next step was to persuade inmates to participate in our study and agree to be interviewed. We were cautious about being introduced to potential participants by prison staff even when some detention directors offered to act as intermediaries, as this could cast doubt on the independence of our research from the surveillance apparatus (risk assessments, deradicalization programs, etc.). Indeed, while this would have been more expedient, it carried the disadvantage of potentially associating us with the carceral system, which could create distrust among the detainees. Accordingly, we approached several lawyers to present our research project, along with detailed information and a consent form, in the hope that they would refer us to their incarcerated clients.

Contrary to our expectations, while some inmates declined, most were willing to arrange an interview. While re-traumatization is a recognized risk when interviewing vulnerable populations, such as those in custody, research indicates that interview interactions can be perceived as neutral and non-judgmental. Discussing adverse events can have a therapeutic effect (Bourne & Robson, 2015) and contribute to feelings of validation and inclusion (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023; Martos-Garcia et al., 2022). The chance to break the monotony of incarceration was undoubtedly another reason why inmates agreed to meet with us. Some expressly viewed the interview as an opportunity to share their stories without fear of judgment or evaluation. The truthfulness of responses is a challenge not unique to prison research, but is a universal issue in interview-based research (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023; Dawson, 2019; Crewe & Ievins, 2015). Validation and triangulation methods are essential and available. In our study, we were granted access to the inmates' files, which contained valuable information such as psychological and socio-economic assessments and, sometimes, lengthy court judgements. However, to avoid being influenced by this content during the interviews and to eliminate any risk of inadvertently disclosing personal information, we chose to consult the files only after the interviews were complete. This enabled us to ensure data triangulation while maintaining strict confidentiality. Finally, our initial interviewees recommended us to other inmates, explaining our research project to them and describing how the interview meeting went. By doing this, they helped us address the inherent distrust, apprehension, and anxiety within such a conflict-laden environment (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). This increased the likelihood that other inmates would trust us and allowed us to implement aspects of the snowball sampling method.

Our meetings with the prisoners took place in a visiting room normally used for visits by lawyers, without the presence of a guard or other prison staff. For security reasons relating to the detention regime of our interviewees, we were locked in this room with them until the end of the interview (which we signaled by knocking on the door of the room). Due to the context of our research, namely research conducted in prison, and the nature of the sentences of the individuals we met, we felt that presenting a written consent form for the prisoners to sign would be highly symbolic of the violence they had experienced during their previous interrogations and hearings and would risk arousing legitimate mistrust. In this precise case, we concur with the viewpoint that the adoption by funding organizations and universities of standardized procedures, such as ethical

consent processes and data management plans modelled on those in the natural sciences, may complicate, if not impede outright, certain research strategies, particularly in the context of sensitive fieldwork (De Backer, 2022; Massoumi et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2021;).

For this reason, we opted for verbal consent after clearly explaining our respective identities, the objectives of our research, and the security precautions we were taking with regard to the data collected. Of course, our interviewees had been informed of the research objectives either by their lawyers, who had received the information and consent documents, or by their fellow inmates, who had told them about the interview process. The fact that interviewees recommended us to other prisoners reinforced our approach. We would also like to emphasize that throughout our research, we adopted a continuous consent approach: we clearly informed our interviewees that they had the right not to answer certain questions, to interrupt the interview at any time, and to withdraw from the survey after the interview if they wished, for example by informing their lawyer or the direction of the prison. The room in which our interviews took place was (of course) not equipped with any automatic surveillance devices. We asked our participants for permission to record the interview each time. Interview questions ranged from a discussion of the interviewee's experiences in prison to more precise questions about his personal trajectory (family history, school and employment pathways, etc.). We also posed more dedicated questions regarding the rationales behind joining (or have intended to join) either an "Islamic Militant Activist Group" in Belgium (de Koning et al., 2020) and/or an insurgent group in Syria. Several interview questions allowed the interviewee to express his opinions regarding the public treatment of radicalization, violent extremism and counter-radicalization in Belgium. The interviews and their transcripts were then stored in a pseudonymized, secure and encrypted manner. The overwhelming majority of our participants agreed to be recorded. When this request was refused, one of us took notes in a similarly pseudonymized manner so that these notes could not lead to the identification of the person. The vast majority of our interviews lasted between 2.5 and 4 hours. As our research took place before the implementation of the GDPR in our respective universities and the appointment of a Data Officer, we did not submit our research to an ethics committee, which had not yet been institutionalized at the time. However, as experimented researchers who are mindful of power relations, and as we emphasize in this article, we were extremely attentive to ethical issues and the potential negative consequences (such as retraumatization, increased surveillance, voyeurism, misrepresentation or negative stereotyping) that our investigation could have had on our participants. Furthermore, before implementation, the research methodology and its objectives were carefully analyzed not only by the funding bodies (in our case, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation) but also by the management of the prisons, most of whom have a solid background in social sciences.

How prison regimes impacted the research plan

The Belgian federal action plan against radicalization in prisons considers correctional facilities as potential hotspots or fertile ground for radicalization. From a scientific perspective, however, this remains an unresolved question: while some researchers affirm that this is indeed the case (Basra & Neumann, 2020; Neumann, 2010), others conclude otherwise (Jones & Narag, 2019). Despite the ongoing debate, political measures have been taken to heighten security for inmates prosecuted for or convicted of 'terrorist offences', as well as for those identified as engaging in proselytization or susceptible to radicalization.

According to Basra and Neumann (2020, p. 33), there are three main categories of prison regimes to manage the risks these inmates pose or represent: "1) Placing all extremists together

(‘concentration’); 2) Dispersing them among the regular criminal population (‘dispersal’); 3) isolating them from each other and the regular criminal population (‘isolation’)”. The Belgian federal action plan against radicalization in prisons advocates for a mixed approach. Firstly, it specifies that inmates who pose a constant threat to the internal and external security of a detention facility may be placed under an individual special security regime (ISSR), which typically involves isolation (Kervyn de Meerendre et al., 2022: p. 86). ISSRs consist of a series of measures aimed at restricting or eliminating contact with other inmates within the prison and with their relatives outside, such as confinement in individual security cells devoid of objects that could be used for self-harm, constant 24-hour surveillance, exclusion from most individual and group activities (no television, no work, and no access to the courtyard), severe limitations on telephone calls and visits, and systematic monitoring of incoming and outgoing correspondence. Legally, solitary confinement does not prevent visits. However, according to the president of the Prison Surveillance Central Council himself, it is intended to act as a deterrent for both the prisoner and their family (Reix, 2022). Indeed, the procedure for visiting a relative in solitary confinement is more cumbersome than the procedure for visits in ordinary detention. In addition, security measures are more stringent: people can only talk to each other through armored glass. Often, the detainee asks their family not to visit them (Reix, 2022). These measures severely compromise inmates’ need for human interaction and hinder their opportunities to participate in rehabilitation programs (Axelsson et al., 2023; Smith, 2006). Secondly, the Belgian Federal Action Plan proposes an alternative to solitary confinement: establishing two units with 20 places each, known as the “De-Rad:Ex” units. “Rad” stands for “Radicalization” and “Ex” for “Extremism”. The plan recommends concentrating inmates who are considered to pose a significant risk of proselytization or involvement in planning a terrorist attack in these high-security areas (Kervyn de Meerendre et al., 2022; Brion, 2019). Thirdly, the plan recommends dispersing 'radicalized inmates' whose level of radicalization is considered manageable into the regular prison population.

We conducted interviews with inmates at two detention facilities: a 502-beds Pennsylvania-style prison, commissioned in 1884, where inmates spend 23 hours a day in their cells; and a 420-beds Auburn-style prison, commissioned in 2002, where detainees spend the day either in cells or in large collective workshops, depending on the demand and supply for work. At the time of the interviews, none of the inmates in either facility was in solitary confinement. However, many had been isolated for months, with one individual having endured solitary confinement for over a year. Following the 'instructions regarding extremism' issued by the General Directorate of Correctional Facilities on 2 April 2015, all detainees prosecuted or convicted of terrorist offences, or deemed to be 'radicalized', were first placed in isolation for two months. After this period, their situation was reassessed (Brion, 2019). For some, isolation has been extended.

In the first facility, the number of inmates prosecuted or convicted of terrorist offences, or considered to be 'radicalized', was relatively low due to the dispersal policy across the country's prisons (Crahay, 2022). Most of these inmates shared a cell with one or two others and went to the prison yard once a day with all the inmates in the same wing. The number of 'extremist' inmates was higher in the second facility, which was home to one of Belgium’s two 'De-Rad:Ex' units. Some of the inmates we interviewed were integrated into the general prison population, while others were assigned to the high-security unit. Unlike the former group, the latter group was restricted from working with or accompanying inmates of other units to the regular prison yard. Instead, they were permitted to access their own designated yard every other day, either individually or in pairs chosen by surveillance officers. This yard, measuring a mere 9 m² and shaped like a slice of pie, was fenced and colloquially referred to as 'the cage'. Similarly, they were barred from taking part in the group activities that punctuate prison life. In cases of absolute necessity, they were permitted to move from point A to point B individually or in very small groups

under the escort of one or two surveillance officers, while blindfolded. Furthermore, any other movement within the wings was prohibited during transit to prevent contact with other inmates. Some measures have been implemented to improve their living conditions, such as increased exposure to sunlight, an office for intervention sessions, and a poorly ventilated makeshift gym (Kervyn de Meerendre et al., 2022). However, these mobility measures and constraints allow only limited contact with relatives and representatives of civil society (Axelsson et al., 2023). This context exemplifies the clarity of Rowe's statement (2014, p. 412) that “prisons are about pain”. Rostaing (2012) uses the term 'degrading institution' to illustrate the 'despicable' mission assigned to prisons and the poor detention conditions exacerbated by a lack of resources and overcrowding, which affect relations between staff and inmates.

Another important aspect of the conditions of detention for inmates convicted of terrorist offences and those suspected of radicalization is subjecting them to constant observation through extensive monitoring and evaluation reports (Kervyn de Meerendre et al., 2022). This highlights the perception of prisons as conflictual settings characterized by coercion, distrust (Cohen and Arieli, 2011; Martos-Garcia et al., 2022), and imbalanced power dynamics (Rowe, 2014). Moreover, as Quina and her colleagues (2007) have stated, individuals in criminal custody often experience multiple traumas, not only from their past, but also from ongoing stressors within the prison environment. For example, some may experience ongoing trauma from being separated from their children, while others may grieve the loss of friends and family. Despite striving for independence and neutrality, researchers can inadvertently become entangled in the unequal power relationships between prison staff and inmates, potentially replicating these dynamics in their work (Chantraine & Scheer, 2022). Indeed, despite our careful efforts to navigate the tension-filled 'cold war' between staff and prisoners, we were still, in some respects, under the influence of penal authority.

Two incidents that occurred during our field research illustrate this point, despite the many precautions we took. On one occasion, despite having agreed to meet with us and despite having been informed of the objectives of the research by his lawyer, a detainee spent several minutes expressing his anger towards the penal system. He frequently used the term 'you' to embody the surveillance mechanisms to which he was subjected and lamented the years-long enforced separation from his wife and children for security reasons. By doing so, he associated us with the prison system, whose injustice and severity he condemned. Our identity as white female academics, mirroring the identity of the psychologists and social workers responsible for his assessment, undoubtedly played a role in the association he made between us and the prison system. It was only after we stressed our independence from the detention system and suggested ending the interview that he began to calm down. After 45 minutes of tense discussion, we suggested ending the interview and possibly returning another day. At that point, our participant calmed down, as if this exchange had allowed him to express his emotions. We later learned that he had indeed just received an official letter that very morning preventing him from re-establishing contact with members of his family. In the end, the interview lasted almost four hours, illustrating that a relationship can still be forged in the field despite a tense start.

During another interview, our attempts to leave the room by knocking on the door went unanswered. It was summer, the room was stiflingly hot, and there were no windows. After waiting and knocking for 20 minutes with no response, the distressed detainee pressed the alarm button. Shortly thereafter, the jail's armed security unit arrived abruptly and opened the door. Although we explained the situation, it was clear that they were displeased. When we were instructed to separate from the inmate — him to the right and us to the left — we resisted, wanting to ensure that he would not be punished or mistreated. The following day, when we returned to the detention centre,

we were made to wait for over an hour and a half without being given a reason. This suggested possible retaliation for our actions on the previous day. We had to call the director to ask him to intervene. Even then, we lost a significant amount of time in the security screening, having to negotiate the presence of our recorder and writing blocks once again before passing through the security airlock. One of us had to remove her bra and pass through the airlock system again. We perceived this as a punitive response for showing too much empathy towards our respondent, thereby disturbing the fragile equilibrium between detainees and external visitors. This minor incident highlighted the power dynamics within the prison and served as a reminder to us, researchers, that front-line officers have considerable authority to disrupt access to fieldwork within the penal institution.

Masculinity, gender, and racial relations

Prisons are 'gendered organizations' (Béraud et al., 2017; Weaver et al., 2025). Men are overrepresented in prison (Crewe, 2014; Maguire, 2021). The same is true of inmates incarcerated for 'terrorism' or labelled as 'radicalized' by the penal system. Due to the overrepresentation of male inmates, prisons rely on codified conceptions of masculinity and femininity, which they also perpetuate (Béraud et al., 2017). However, literature on how the gendered identities of researchers affect fieldwork in detention settings is exceedingly rare (Bernard & Devresse, 2023; Branders & Gauthier, 2023, Schmidt, 2021).

At the time of our research, the number of women considered to be 'radicalized' and held in Belgian prisons was very limited, with most of those who had travelled to Syria or Iraq as foreign fighters or volunteers being held in the al-Hol or al-Roj camps. Consequently, we conducted our fieldwork in men's detention centres. Several studies have shown that male prisoners often engage in exaggerated demonstrations of stereotypical masculinity through behavior, practices, and discourse (Béraud et al., 2017). Physical exercise, particularly weight training, is utilized to reclaim virility within the confines of an institution perceived to be emasculating (Gras, 2003). This behavior is sometimes viewed as a form of resilience, a means of resisting the penal system, and a way to reduce reliance on family members (Béraud et al., 2017). Physical activities such as sports and weight training are also linked to increased self-confidence. Incarceration often results in a decreased sense of self-worth, reflecting a negative self-image and a life marked by failures. Engaging in sports can combat this negative self-perception (Gras, 2003). Therefore, sports and weight training can help inmates reclaim their identity and forge an image of themselves as strong, respectable men (Bodin et al., 2007). For our respondents, this was particularly relevant as weight training was often the only permitted activity within their individual special security regime (ISSR).

During and after our fieldwork, we frequently fielded questions from colleagues, legal professionals such as prosecutors and lawyers, and even family members about whether this research environment was too challenging for two female researchers. This was probably based on preconceived ideas of prisons as inherently violent spaces dominated by toxic masculinity and the stereotype that Muslim prisoners accused of terrorism or considered 'radicalized' are essentially phallocratic and violent. Contrary to these expectations, however, our experience was quite the opposite. We believe that, in this hypermasculine environment, being a woman facilitated a quicker disengagement from hyper-virile behavior. Our male respondents, some of whom had battlefield experience or anticipated having it before their incarceration, felt no need to prove their physical strength to us. We argue that male researchers may find it more challenging to foster trust and confidence, particularly in group settings where renouncing radical ideologies and actions could lead to inmates being accused of betraying the cause.

Another aspect of positionality is the racial dynamic between researchers and respondents. Radicalization and terrorism studies are largely dominated by Western white scholars, which contrasts with the background of many individuals involved in radicalization. These individuals often have at least one (grand)parent of foreign origin, a fact that is rarely acknowledged in research interactions. As two white, non-Muslim academics interviewing racialized men from socio-economically deprived families and neighborhoods, we quickly noticed a tendency among our respondents to challenge the racial and class-based power imbalance. They regularly tested our knowledge of Arabic, Islamic literature, and history, as well as our understanding of the Syrian war and its impact on insurgent groups. Some expressed fatigue at having to engage with interlocutors who they felt lacked a nuanced understanding of Islamic culture, or who inappropriately invoked Islamic concepts. In this context, the misuse of 'taqiyya', a term signifying dissimulation within the Shia tradition, by prison psychosocial service staff in their evaluations (Chantraine & Scheer, 2022) exemplifies to them the institutionalization and 'Islamization of suspicion' (Kervyn de Meerendre et al., 2022). It is difficult to ascertain whether this 'testing' of our knowledge had a significant impact on the respondents' willingness to disclose information. Nevertheless, this vetting became routine when initiating interviews, leading to moments of complicity and jokes with our respondents (Pollack & Eldridge, 2016).

Discussion

This research sought to interrogate the methodological, ethical, and epistemological dimensions of conducting fieldwork on radicalization within carceral environments, emphasizing how reflexivity can serve as both an analytical and moral compass. Our experience reveals that the production of knowledge in such settings is deeply embedded within networks of power, surveillance, and positionality, which shape access, relationships, and recalibrations throughout the research process.

The first key insight concerns the precarious and negotiated nature of access to prison spaces. Although bureaucratic approval formally determines entry, our experience highlights that access ultimately hinges on researchers' institutional affiliation and reputation, as well as the discretionary power of front-line prison staff. These individuals act as de facto gatekeepers (Roberts & Indermaur, 2008) whose willingness to accommodate or restrict researchers' presence directly affects the feasibility and quality of fieldwork. Despite having official approval, we often had to renegotiate our presence and our research methods with prison officers, who mediated our interactions with inmates. This illustrates the fact that institutional authorization does not guarantee operational access. It also complicates the positivist notion of the researcher as a neutral observer, instead situating them within a fluctuating web of permissions, trust, and control (Chantraine & Scheer, 2022). Reflexive awareness of these layered negotiations is therefore essential for understanding how knowledge about detained populations is mediated by carceral hierarchies.

A second dimension of reflexivity emerges from our ethical positioning toward participants. The incarceration conditions of the individuals we interviewed—marked by isolation, uncertainty, and psychological strain—required distancing ourselves from the surveillance system in order to build trust (and careful navigation of formal ethics protocols). Our decision to forego written consent and replace it with verbal and iterative forms of consent reflects an effort to mitigate retraumatization and respect participants' emotional boundaries (O'Brien et al., 2022). Such adaptations underscore the tension between institutional ethical frameworks and the lived ethics of fieldwork (Castro e Almeida & Harris, 2021; Esholdt & Jørgensen, 2021a) and provide useful consideration regarding the transfer of empathy as a critical methodological tool (Walsh, 2018) in

the field of radicalization research. Conventional "tick-the-box" procedures (Morrisson et al., 2021) risk reproducing bureaucratic violence (Massoumi et al., 2019) by prioritizing procedural compliance over participants' well-being. Reflexivity here thus functions as a form of situated ethics, one that privileges responsiveness and care over procedural compliance.

Our gendered positionality shaped field interactions in unexpected ways. As women in a hypermasculine environment (Crewe, 2014; Maguire, 2021), we found that our presence often disarmed displays of virility and encouraged more open dialogue. Rather than viewing gender solely as a source of vulnerability, our experience suggests it can facilitate trust under specific conditions (Badurdeen, 2018; Jørgensen & Esholdt, 2021b). However, this advantage coexists with broader gendered power asymmetries that demand continual reflexive attention to how embodiment influences trust and disclosure.

Race and class dynamics further complicated our research encounters. As white, non-Muslim academics interviewing mostly racialized Muslim men from marginalized backgrounds, we faced subtle challenges to our legitimacy. Respondents frequently "tested" our familiarity with Arabic terms, Islamic literature, and Middle Eastern geopolitics—acts that reflected both skepticism and an assertion of epistemic agency. These moments highlight how participants actively negotiate knowledge hierarchies, pushing researchers to confront the racialized and colonial underpinnings of radicalization studies (Behl, 2017; Chukwuma, 2024; Reiter, 2022). Acknowledging these asymmetries does not neutralize them but makes them analytically visible and ethically significant.

Taken together, these insights demonstrate that reflexivity in radicalization research extends beyond self-awareness; it entails confronting the structural conditions under which research is conducted. Reflexivity thus becomes a methodological necessity that enhances both transparency and ethical accountability (Martos-Garcia et al., 2022). It compels scholars to recognize that access, trust, and data are co-produced through asymmetrical relations of power, emotion, and institutional constraint.

Finally, in their account of the constraints surrounding research in violent contexts, Abdelnour and his colleagues (2021) argue that the abuses and power disparities inherent in such settings — including prisons — mean that researchers must carefully consider how they portray their subjects. Similarly, Knott (2019) urges researchers to carefully analyze what and when to publish, particularly on topics laden with political and security sensitivities. In addition to the difficulties of obtaining administrative and formal access to prisons, the hostile institutional environment impacting our respondents and the complexities of positionality with regard to gender, race and class, we faced a profound dilemma at the end of our fieldwork: how could we disseminate our findings ethically while preserving the anonymity of our interviewees? Throughout our fieldwork, we rigorously avoided recording prisoners' names or noting down any other identifiable information. We adopted the practice of using coded nicknames when discussing our interviews among ourselves. Additionally, we used secure cloud storage and separate documents to retain data. However, anonymization and pseudonymization techniques are inherently limited in the context of prison research; researchers are subject to surveillance as prison staff must monitor who is involved in interviews to manage inmate movements within the facility (Chantraine & Scheer, 2022; Gibson-Light & Seim, 2020; Rostaing, 2012). As we prepared to report our findings, we were firmly resolved that no individual prisoner would be identifiable from our case studies. However, the relatively small number of interviews we conducted (approximately 20) and our aim to understand the complexities of radicalization meant we faced a difficult decision. We could either risk revealing specific details of our subjects' lives that could potentially make them identifiable to other inmates or security professionals, or we could resort to using 'necessary fictions' (Grossman & Gerrand, 2021). This would safeguard participant anonymity, but it would raise questions around

the veracity and authenticity standards in social science research. To date, this issue remains unresolved. However, by offering methodological and ethical considerations in an area of research where such issues are not usually discussed, we hope to enrich the field and honor the sensitive nature of our challenging yet deeply rewarding fieldwork.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the data collection for this study. Fabienne Brion took a leading role in research design and conceptual development of the study. Corinne Torrekens prepared the first draft of the manuscript. Fabienne Brion substantially contributed to revising and reframing sections of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The research was conducted before the GDPR, and ethical boards came into force at our respective universities. All ethical requirements have been monitored as part of the grant agreement that has been established with the funding institution and signed by our respective universities.

Informed Consent form

A document outlining the identity of the researchers and the objectives of the study was provided to participants via their solicitor. At the beginning of the interview, this information was reiterated verbally, along with the participant's right not to answer certain questions, to terminate the interview at any time without giving a reason, and to withdraw from the study by informing their solicitor without having to provide a justification.

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Publisher's note

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