Challenges Researching Suspicious Populations:
Lessons from Fieldwork with the Michigan Militia_____

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Abstract:

> Using experiences from more than three years of ethnographic and interview work with the Michigan militia, I discuss methodological issues that arise at each phase of the research process when studying "suspicious" populations. Issues discussed include preparing for possible illegal or dangerous behavior and interacting with Institutional Review Boards when planning a new project, navigating fundamental ideological disagreements, thinking like a "spy" and managing potential danger while in the field, and the challenges posed when one's work enters the public sphere after concluding fieldwork. The difficulties I describe are not unique to studying militias or other right-wing groups, but apply to groups that are difficult to access and study because of their political or behavioral differences with the researcher, or because of their general distrust of outsiders. Elucidation of these issues is useful for improving research techniques and outcomes and for reducing researcher anxiety in the field.

INTRODUCTION

I was so creeped out by the condition of the property that I did not do a good job of mentally recording its details. Unidentifiable junk was piled up everywhere, in some places almost 20 feet high. A dog I could not see barked at me from the left as I approached the building while an older man in camo greeted me, called me "Honey," and told me to go inside but be careful to not slip in the mud. He said almost everyone was there and they'd get started soon. Inside, the stench of wet dog combined with cat urine was immediately intolerable, and a TV was blaring recorded episodes of Jericho. *A sign on the door read, "no guns permitted on the premises," in large black letters with no-gun symbol behind it. In much smaller letters, the sign read "by criminals," presumably explaining why nearly everyone inside was cradling or cleaning a rifle or examining ammunition. I sat down next to a young girl, probably 12 or 13, who proved to be quite precocious. She was there with her step-father, and soon told me, 'This place makes me nervous. I don't want to be here. My mom doesn't want me here either. Is what goes on here illegal? My mom said it might be.[1]'* -Fieldnotes, March 7, 2009

The above selection is taken from the fieldnotes of my most anxiety-producing experience in the field while studying the Michigan militia. This experience was not prototypical of my research; I chose to enter what I knew would be a problematic environment because it would likely provide interesting contrast to the majority of my data. It was neither colleagues nor academic writing that helped prepare me for this experience, but rather militia members from other groups who helped me think about and plan for the likely discomfort and potential danger of this particular encounter.

Seventeen years ago, Raymond Lee in the Sage Handbook *Dangerous Fieldwork* (1994) called for increased discussion of fieldwork with "dangerous" groups to improve the safety (and perhaps the methods) of ethnographic researchers. In that time, relatively little besides occasional methodological appendices to ethnographic books has been written to this effect. This paper is a response to Lee, and to Robert Emerson's (1987) earlier request for increased discussion of the processes, interactions and writing of ethnography. It is, in some ways, an ethnography of ethnography. I draw from my fieldwork experiences with the Michigan militia to illustrate some of the difficulties that arise in each stage of the research process: planning to enter the field, connecting with participants, and disengaging from the field while reporting findings. I have chosen examples that are illustrative of problems that researchers of a variety of groups may face while providing sufficient context so readers may determine for themselves the applicability of my assessments to other populations.

Following an exploration of other authors who have addressed methodological challenges with suspicious groups, I explain my choice of "suspicious" rather than other labels that have previously been used for these populations. I provide some information regarding the contemporary Michigan Militia so the reader may have a fuller context for understanding my examples and determining applicability to their own groups of interests, and I explain ways in which I may have been more comfortable and able to access this particular group because of my own background.

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[1] I use single quotation marks to denote where I am relying on memory, rather than recorded audio, for the quotation. I replicate both the content and vernacular of the quote to the best of my recollection.

I then discuss dilemmas encountered when planning to enter the field. I especially emphasize interactions with Institutional Review Boards but also give attention to framing interview questions, compensating participants, preparing for potentially problematic behaviors from participants, and preserving personal boundaries. Next, I discuss challenges in doing research with suspicious groups. I reference gaining access and rapport, but give greater focus to issues that follow this initial step: managing ideological disagreements with participants; navigating participants' gendered expectations, trust tests, and conversion attempts; avoiding appearing like an undercover officer; and continued risk management. Finally, I discuss challenges that occur after leaving the field, when researchers stop interacting as frequently with participants and begin to present and publish or receive media attention regarding their work.

From Dangerous Groups to Suspicious Groups

Although discussions of "dangerous" groups specifically are still uncommon, the academic literature is replete with examples from sociologists and anthropologists who have written more generally about issues that all ethnographers must grapple with in their work. Many authors have suggested ways to approach and interact with populations whose identities, beliefs, or fieldsites pose problems for qualitative researchers. Andrew Yip (2008), for example, discusses populations who are problematic to access because they are especially concerned about identity management within their communities. LGBT Christians and Muslims were Yip's groups of interest, but his dilemmas in the field and suggestions for managing them are applicable to any group whose members may face ridicule or ostracism from others in their community if some hidden part of their identity were to be revealed. Yip and other ethnographers draw heavily on feminist scholars who call particular attention to how researchers' identity characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender, class, nationality) may influence the data they obtain once in the field (Bhavnani 1993; Cook and Fonow 1986; Kondo 1986; collected works in Wolf 1996).

Other social scientists highlight how the fieldsite itself may necessitate uncomfortable or questionable behaviors from researchers in order for them to maintain contact with their populations of interest. Philippe Bourgois, for example, demonstrates continual struggles with his own ethical and legal marginality while embedded with drug users and street criminals in New York (2002) and with heroin addicts in San Francisco (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Similarly, Alice Goffman (2009) and Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) both provide examples of how ethnographers may sometimes need to violate ethical commitments that are at least presumed (often by IRBs), if unstated, such as reporting any illegal or dangerous activity to authorities, in order to understand certain subcultures. These authors are less prescriptive, but their respective accounts are nonetheless illustrative of dilemmas with and possible solutions for populations who may face not only social but also legal consequences if their behaviors were publicized.

Other scholars discuss site-related ethical problems that all qualitative researchers continue to face even after leaving the field. Carolyn Ellis (1995), for example, shares her struggles navigating differences between participants' and her own understandings of interviews and subsequent portrayals of the fishing community she studied. In so doing, she demonstrates how ethical obligations to populations of interest do not end upon leaving the field. Arlene Stein's work with small-town LGBT activists (2010) goes a step further and provides an example of how it may be crucial in some cases to protect participants' identities not only from the outside world, but also from each other. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor (2011) make us question whether we can truly ever leave the field as they discuss continuing connections to their drag queen participants many years after their project ended.

Much of the above work could be understood as applicable to marginalized populations—those whose social characteristics or behaviors mean they are legally, financially, or otherwise socially disadvantaged. Comparatively little has been done on groups who are, in effect, *self*-marginalizing. That is, some groups may be comprised largely of people who possess a great deal of social power (e.g., white men), but who ideologically or behaviorally distance themselves from more normative routes of expression and are therefore often wary of outsiders. This posturing means that scholars often find these groups' rhetoric objectionable, or at least unpalatable and unfamiliar, and find the fieldsites for these populations equally troubling. This has contributed to a systematic bias toward studying "progressive" or liberal groups in social movements research and an underrepresentation of more conservative organizations in the literature (Lee 1994; McVeigh 2009).

There is little agreement over a comprehensive label for these self-marginalizing groups. Some prefer "dangerous" because of a seemingly greater potential for violence among certain populations (Lee 1994). Others may be "unloved" for their particular political stance or behavior (Fielding 1982), "distasteful" for their lack of self-criticism and intolerance of societal discord, (Esseveld and Eyerman 1992), "sensitive" and suspicious of outsiders (Lee and Renzetti 1990), "hidden" from the view of "mainstream" (and presumably normative) society (Watters and Biernacki 1989), or "awkward" because of ideological characteristics that make them psychologically difficult targets for study (Polletta 2006). The modifiers here all generally reflect that there is some underlying difficulty in accessing, studying, and reporting on the population because group members perceive some potential danger or cost in the research. For this paper, I use "suspicious groups" to encompass this meaning while hopefully avoiding some of the negative connotations of other terms. Importantly, groups' suspicion may be either broad (e.g., toward the government) or specific (e.g., toward the researcher), and may either be based entirely in paranoia, or objectively justified.

A 1976 article by Richard Berk and Joseph Adams on juvenile delinquents continues to be cited for interactions with this kind of group ("deviant" groups in the authors' terminology). Berk and Adams provide well-justified lists for establishing and maintaining trust, respect, and acceptance, and for gathering data. They say, for example, that researchers should first gain the trust of a group's leaders before forcing interactions with members, and that overt data collection should not be a pressing focus until trust has been gained. Many of Berk's and Adams' suggestions are still apt, but a more modernized set of suggestions is needed to take into account issues of gender in the field and evolving technology in particular.

A more recent article, and one of the most notable methodological examinations of suspicious groups is Kathy Blee's *White Knuckle Research* (1998), which addresses the role of fear in her study of the Ku Klux Klan. Blee, following other feminist scholarship (see Kleinman and Copp 1993; Naples 2004), rightly notes that researchers' emotions should not be ignored in the course of fieldwork or analysis, but should instead be considered another important source of data. Fear was not only a useful tool for Blee's gauging how others might feel about supremacist groups, for instance, but also for understanding how supremacists are fearful of those who would misrepresent or attempt to undermine them.

Attention to emotions in the field is valuable. While the militia presented fewer potential physical dangers for me than supremacists did for Blee, there nonetheless were scenarios where I was fearful in the field: the unusual gathering described at the beginning of this paper; one interview at a rural restaurant where my interviewee unexpectedly brought along two other male members who were unknown to me; one occasion en route to a meeting where interstate

construction forced me to travel, alone and after dark, through an unfamiliar and very sketchy portion of Detroit where I saw both drugs and firearms changing hands at the side of the roads (though my fear in this case was disconnected from the militia). In each case, I was careful to record my own emotional response in my fieldnotes to allow for better contextualization of how others might experience fear around this group, and to later try to determine the extent to which my fears had been justified, rather than based on supposition or stereotypes. Recording emotional responses along with fieldnotes in this way is one of the tactics that Blee recommends, but there is less discussion in the methods literature about the behavioral and cognitive elements of fieldwork with suspicious groups.

WHAT IS THE MICHIGAN MILITIA?

It is necessary to provide some context regarding what the Michigan militia is and why they qualify as a suspicious group before examining what they can teach us about the behavioral and cognitive components of fieldwork. Many people first heard of the contemporary militia in 1995, when Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was erroneously described as a militia member in the press. Despite Congressional hearings with militia leaders and an FBI investigation into militias that ultimately found no wrongdoing by the organization, many people still believe them to be uniformly anti-government, violent, and prone to conspiracy theories.

I have found these characterizations to be largely inaccurate as applied to contemporary militias in Michigan, although they may have been more apt 15 years ago. Militia units in Michigan primarily operate in and near larger cities, as opposed to rural areas, and have no central organizational structure. One militia unit, the South East Michigan Volunteer Militia (SMVM), runs www.michiganmilitia.com and its affiliated YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace pages; because of this group's visibility and longevity (many leaders have been involved with the militia since its inception in 1994), it serves as a model for other militia units in Michigan and in several other states, but other units modify the training to suit their preferences and in no way report to SMVM. Members from different units meet to train with each other several times a year, but typically train in their own communities due to distance and limited resources.

Militia members are predominantly, though not exclusively, white men with an average age of about 38, and many are military veterans. Most are married, have kids, have jobs, vote, and otherwise participate normatively in society. Most members are employed in working- or lower-middle class occupations like delivery drivers or factory workers, though the 40 members I formally interviewed have more education than the average American (about 85% of my interviewees have at least some college, while the 2000 Census indicates that about 52% of all Americans have this level of education).

I have often heard media representatives who attend militia functions remark that the group "feels like grown-up boy scouts," rather than a group of angry, anti-government agitators, as they are often portrayed in film or news reports. Members see their activity as an enacted reminder to politicians that people still care about an originalist interpretation of the Constitution, and as a practical way to prepare themselves and their families for dangers ranging from terrorism to natural disasters. Gun rights and training are central to militia identity despite the group's claims of being broader in focus. Target shooting is a form of recreation for militia members, and, for many of them, firearms symbolically represent the masculine, frontier culture undergirding the mythology of this nation's founding (see Gibson 1994; Mulloy 2008). Possessing and skillfully using firearms is, in other words, a marker of both manliness and Americanness for many militia members.

The Michigan militia qualifies as a suspicious group[2] because its members, who tend to feel that the two-party system does not represent their political interests, often believe government officials should not be trusted generally and that officials may even act to target militia members specifically. At first, this may seem merely paranoid. However, most members live near Michigan cities with long histories of political corruption, and they have seen reports from government agencies like the Department of Homeland Security (2009) that were interpreted as unfair to many political conservatives, including militia members and returning war veterans alike. In light of these factors, there is at least some rational basis for members' distrust of the government. Members are also typically suspicious of researchers or media representatives since so many past reports on the group lack nuance and evidence a clear political or ideological bias.

The militia does not recruit new members in a traditional sense because it does not need to do so. A few groups have recently tried renewing a recruitment strategy that was common in the '90s, that of handing out fliers at gun shows and similar events, but have had little success. Instead, individuals generally find their website with the list of upcoming meeting times and locations and attend one on their own accord. Most do so without knowing anyone already involved in the group, and become interested after some personal or public event heightens their perceived distance from or distrust in the government; the Department of Homeland Security report mentioned above fulfilled this role for many newcomers in spring and summer 2009.

My Positionality
The militia's public accessibility meant that I had a relatively easy way of initially approaching the group. I first attended an SMVM public meeting in March 2008 and introduced myself as a student originally from the rural South who was somewhat familiar with firearms. Several guns were always present in my household growing up, and I was taught to respect and safely handle them at a young age, but never felt a particular affinity for them. We lived in an isolated area, and it was not uncommon that my father equipped a sidearm "just in case" when investigating disturbances on the property, such as when several loud, drunken men on horseback wandered into our yard late one summer night. The only occasion my father ever fired, or even revealed, the weapon in a defensive scenario was when he arrived home early from work one day and discovered an obviously rabid coyote trying to reach my pet rabbit.

At my father's behest, I obtained a concealed pistol license (CPL) when I graduated from college, and he gave me his trusted Smith and Wesson revolver. I never really thought about it, nor removed it from its locked case, but I was admittedly glad to know it was there one night when my older neighbor and two of his male friends tested whether my door was locked, pretending they had confused it with their own. I mentioned this story and my CPL to the militia

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[2] Examples of other groups that may experience similar suspicion include Earth Liberation Front, a loosely organized, liberal pro-environmental group that often resorts to violent tactics to advance their agenda. Members of this group are similarly suspicious of outsiders who may undermine their planned protests, or newcomers who may be undercover law enforcement intent on bringing the organization down (Leader and Probst 2003). This type of suspicion is not limited to politically-oriented groups, however, as even some polygamist religious sects are suspicious of those who want to criticize or modify their culture (Gordon 1996). Likewise, it is nearly impossible to study many domestic violence support organizations who have concerns about their limited power to prevent future acts of violence on their clients and who may operate in murky areas of the law (Tierney 1982). Members of all these groups may face legal or interpersonal consequences if their identities are made public as a result of research, and therefore often exhibit wariness, or suspicion, of outsiders.

members when I was evaluating the possibility of conducing research at the first meeting I attended. It was an opportunity to "prove" my familiarity with guns and gun culture.

From having read their website, I assumed the militia might enjoy the opportunity to help educate people about firearms and related legislation. I asked them for help figuring out whether Michigan had CPL reciprocity with my home state, and listened to them talk about Michigan's equivalent licensing procedure. This provided an opportunity for them to be in a position of relative authority, while still marking me as informed about issues of concern to them. After the meeting, I broached the possibility of conducting research on the militia with the men who had been most receptive to my inquiry, saying I thought I could use my "informed" background to provide a more accurate representation of the group than had been done in the past. They were receptive, even excited about the possibility, and the next day I started planning my formal entry to the field.

PREPARING TO ENTER THE FIELD

Prior to beginning fieldwork, all researchers must determine the best way to access and interact with their populations of interest. A greater degree of strategic planning is required with populations who are suspicious of outsiders in order to improve data outcomes as well as researcher safety. In this section, I discuss how interview questions and participant compensation must be more carefully considered with suspicious groups, how IRBs may be simultaneously over- and under-prepared to evaluate research of this nature, and how preparing for problematic participant behavior and protecting personal boundaries in the field are necessary with suspicious groups.

Interview Questions

All qualitative researchers must grapple with existing literature and popular suppositions about their groups of interest to develop a new and provocative set of questions for their participants. With suspicious groups, I have found that it is important to be particularly attentive to questions and terminology that may be easily misinterpreted by or irritating to group members. For example, having grown up in a rural area with many lower-middle and working-class people, I knew that members were likely to be offended if I asked any variant of the question, "what is your income?" Asking about income may be misinterpreted as an attempt to assess intrinsic worth, or simply be considered too personal, especially for men, and especially during times of economic hardship.

Instead, I asked participants to answer "yes" or "no" to, "Would you say you and your family are financially comfortable right now?" No participant refused this question, and a few provided further elaboration, without prompting. This question did not provide a quantitative answer that I could compare across interview respondents, but did provide an indication of whether each interviewee expressed concern about their financial stability, which was a more relevant indicator for my purposes of assessing claims that men participate in militias out of a sense of economic frustration (e.g., SPLC 2010).

I was less successful in avoiding problematic terminology during an early interview with a militia member when I mentioned that I had an interest in studying the "right-wing" since so many academics did not. The interview was temporarily derailed as I had a ten-minute lesson on why the militia was "Libertarian," or even apolitical, but not "right-wing, left-wing, or any-wing!" Although some other members may not have taken offense to this label, I was careful not to use it in future interactions, unless I clearly categorized it as something that other people used

to describe the group. I tried to be attentive to other terminology that offended group members by paying attention not only to in-person interactions, but also to posts on militia units' public webpages and private forums since members often share and discuss news stories that include phrasing that irritates them.

Participant Compensation

Another area where the potential for offending members of suspicious groups is high is participant compensation. Providing some compensation for participation in interviews is a fairly standard practice. Some authors have noted that payment is an appropriate and necessary exchange for participants' time (e.g., Weiss 1995), and many researchers apply for funding solely for this purpose. However, with some suspicious groups, compensation may provoke distrust or even be insulting to members' sense of identity.

When planning my study, I anticipated that many militia members would not be very well-off financially. I planned to truthfully tell them that I was a student, with a small income and could not afford to purchase required gear for militia participation if they pushed me to join the organization. If I offered this explanation while paying interviewees even a low sum for their participation, members would have questioned the story and my honesty. Many people outside academia do not understand funding sources for research projects, and even if I had chosen this option and explained it, some members would have interpreted this to mean the government, or at least university officials, were closely monitoring my research.

More importantly, militia members strongly feel it is their civic duty to help other people, and many would have found it insulting to accept payment for an hour-long interview, perhaps thinking it implied they would not have helped me without a promise of compensation. This would have been especially true for some male members who strongly believe in traditional gender roles and who would have found it both ludicrous and humiliating to take even a small amount of money from a younger female. Three interviewees separately confirmed this would have been a problem for at least some members when they strongly insisted on paying for my coffee or sandwich from the location where we had chosen to meet for the interview. One remarked, 'You drove all the way out here [3 hours] to meet me, it's the least I can do!' Even though he was doing me a favor by being there, not the reverse, he made it clear that he felt insulted that I even considered paying, and I stopped objecting in order to avoid harming my research relationship with him and others in his militia unit.

Institutional Review Boards

When first conceptualizing a new project, most researchers grapple with how to do so ethically, without harming their participants, and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are involved in this process. Other authors have discussed how IRBs are not always sensitive to the needs and aims of qualitative research, especially ethnographic projects that may need to change quickly in response to what is discovered in the field (Swauger 2011; Katz 2006). Some have characterized these boards as involved in nothing more than "petty tyranny" (Feeley 2007:765), as being too idiosyncratic and thus ineffectual (Stark 2007), or even as violating researcher's First Amendment rights to free speech (Hamburger 2004).

Most researchers would undoubtedly agree with IRBs' goals of participant protection, but may be frustrated by their enactment. A month prior to my militia application and for a project in a graduate seminar, I conducted an online survey of members of white pride and supremacist groups on social networking sites. The survey was anonymous on both ends, and asked questions

about people's motivations for membership. Although this study met the IRB's guidelines for an exempt study, there were eight communications regarding *my* safety before it was approved. Included were requests that, while well-intentioned, would have served to make me appear disingenuous to my participants and thereby *increased* my potential danger. They asked, for example, that I use a non-university email address for the survey contact and to communicate that I was using a pseudonym. I explained why these requests were problematic and the IRB eventually acknowledged, "As our purview extends only to subject protection, your responses are adequate for that purpose."

Suspecting I would have similar problems with approval for my militia interviews, I indicated in my IRB application that I had already introduced myself with my real name, as a private citizen (rather than a researcher) at a public militia function. I initially indicated an intention to pursue an NIH Certificate of Confidentiality, which is designed to protect against forced disclosure of information about participants. In part to avoid this additional step, the IRB asked, "Could you foresee this research being conducted anonymously? This would be the case if interviews are conducted over the phone with the subjects contacting you (and no identifying information is requested) consent would be oral."

I expressed polite befuddlement at how I could obtain a reasonable sample by giving people my phone number and expecting them to spontaneously call me for interviews with no advanced planning, and at how this would truly be anonymous since I would still have in-person contact when giving out a phone number and presumably be able to recognize at least some voices. IRB staff responded by saying they wanted me to come in to talk with them. Feeling very much like a naughty child called to a principal's office, I made an appointment. Once there, an IRB staff member—a white woman in her fifties—took me to a large conference room and demanded, 'Why would a nice girl like you want to study big, scary men like this?' I felt that reminding her of the IRB's mandate to worry about the safety of *participants*, or harping about gender stereotypes would be counter productive, and instead reiterated my qualifications for this type of work. I must have allayed her concerns, as I eventually received approval, but not before yet another written admonition to attend to my safety.

I had requested an exemption from written consent forms, as members of suspicious groups may be averse to signing any official-looking documentation. At final approval, the IRB completely forbade me from recording consent, even a cursory and anonymous, "do you agree to this interview?" after I read through the consent script. Although I adhered to this requirement, I never received an explanation of how this was thought to be better for my participants, and instead was left to assume that the IRB believed this would help further ease participants' worries about formal agreements.

These protections still did not prevent one interviewee's discomfort when I gave him a required sheet with contact information for me, my adviser, and the university's IRB. Upon seeing the IRB's full university address, the interviewee cautiously asked, "So this research is being done *for* the university?" I briefly reiterated the IRB's role in all research, and the interview proceeded, but the interviewee indicated he would not have participated had I been an agent for the university as a government institution, rather than a student doing my own work. Thus, even when the IRB was seemingly working with me to remove perceived barriers to participation in my study, their mere presence as an institutional authority attached to my work nearly impeded my ability to connect with this interviewee, who was a central figure in the movement and eventually helped me make contacts that may have otherwise been inaccessible.

Anticipating Illegal Behavior
The IRB also requested that I remove a warning in my consent information regarding reporting illegal activity. Given that IRB staff believed this was a dangerous group, they seemed remarkably unconcerned about my being exposed to evidence of illegal behavior. In the 1990s, some self-proclaimed militia members had been linked to a variety of activities that could prove harmful to other people, such as when Arizona militia members were arrested in 1996 for making bombs and plotting to blow up federal buildings (PBS 1996). Many researchers (e.g., Bourgois 2002; Goffman 2009; Venkatesh 2008) witness illegal behavior ranging from assault, to drug sale and use, to relatively mundane parole violations as part of the research process. While I did not anticipate that illegal behavior would be especially common or visible in my fieldsite, I nonetheless knew that if I saw illegal weapons (e.g., grenade launchers, fully automatic rifles without proper permits) or heard any kind of violent activity being planned, I would feel obligated to contact law enforcement and had indicated as much on my original consent script. IRB staff seemed satisfied that "anonymity" was enough consideration of these issues and asked that references to illegal behavior be removed from the document, but I knew this was not an accurate reflection of the history of at least some militia groups.

Fortunately, I never needed to contact law enforcement directly. Once, I did tell another militia member about a disconcerting comment during an interview. This member had become a key source for me, and I knew he had an ongoing, cooperative relationship with a local FBI agent. Although I breached the spirit of the "anonymity" IRB wanted me to preserve in this instance, my concern about the possibility of violent action was more important. The interviewee in question later became a member of the Hutaree, the Michigan group that was arrested for plotting to harm police following a long investigation by the FBI, which was in part sparked by information from other militia groups. In this case, I feel my instincts must have been correct, and took this as an example of how IRB simply cannot be the ultimate authority on ethical decisions in fieldwork because of their lack of expertise and distance from the fieldsite.

Preparing for Possible Danger
Other authors have written about dangers that all ethnographers, especially women, may face in the field (e.g., Warren 1988). Researchers of suspicious groups may need to be particularly attentive to this possibility, and develop a risk management plan *before* entering the field. I found it most appropriate to be realistic in my risk assessment, but to plan my research with worst-case scenarios in mind, and to never enter a situation where risk was completely unknown or unpredictable. Expectations can always be adjusted in the field, but it is much more comfortable to feel safer and better prepared than needed, rather than less safe and prepared.

Before entering the field, I read everything available about the militia movement. Much of the existing research proved to be methodologically problematic or blatantly biased, but it nonetheless allowed me to develop a strategy for entering the field that was very cautious and detailed. Whenever I went to an interview, I made sure the location was somewhere I would be comfortable, where at least a few other people would be present. I often picked a restaurant or coffee shop to meet this requirement, while still having enough ambient noise for our conversations to remain relatively private. I only arranged to interview people I had previously encountered at least once in person, so I could gauge my own level of comfort with them, as well as other members' apparent acceptance of and comfort with them. In this way, I recognized the expertise of militia members regarding members of their own group as an equal, if not superior,

source of information relative to academic and journalistic pieces that were several years old or otherwise obviously problematic.

I made sure at least two friends knew where I would be for interviews, personal details I could provide about the interviewee without breaching anonymity, what time the interview should be concluded, and what time to expect a call from me to confirm that I was safely on my way home. If I had any cause whatsoever to be nervous about a particular interview, I also told my friends why I was nervous and usually conscripted a third caller for backup. If I had not reported in at the given time, the callers were to first try to reach me, then to alert the local police if they could not. I never entered a situation where I believed there was a high probably of harm, but constructed a safety plan as though harm were always probable, "just in case."
Notably, just before approving my study, the IRB urged me to "consider" forming a safety plan when I had already designed one several months prior. Their suggestion consisted of, "sharing your iterary [*sic*] of interview dates and locations, time frames, etc., and setting agreed upon call-in checks to [your adviser]." The IRB seemed not to consider that people outside academia were a better choice to fulfill this on-call role, as interviews often were scheduled last minute, when my adviser or anyone else without more regular phone or email access would not know of the interview until long after it should have concluded.

Lee notes that some efforts at managing danger in the field have a "magical character" (1994:29), meaning that they may quell a researcher's fears, but probably do little to attenuate real danger. Had an interviewee kidnapped me or worse, having people who knew where I had been may have facilitated police's locating me. Ultimately, the other, more preventative steps, of which the IRB made no mention, were more important in *avoiding* potentially dangerous scenarios. The IRB was of little use for practical risk management in my work, and, in most cases, the IRB probably should not the primary source of inspiration for risk management assessment or decision-rules. As with assessing illegal or violent behavior in the field, researchers of suspicious groups should be well-read and otherwise informed such that they are the relative experts about their group of interest, and are therefore in the best position to know the possible range of scenarios they should be prepared for with their group.

Personal Boundaries
All fieldworkers need to consider how much they want to tell respondents about their identity outside the field, and this, too, may be especially important for researchers of suspicious groups. Should participants know your age and marital status? Your personal phone number, or only a business one? How specifically should you indicate where you live, if asked?
Militia members know my real name and age, but when I was actively recruiting interviewees, I purchased a secondary pre-paid cell phone so that my other personal information was better controlled; with some databases, people can use your phone number to determine your home address and other information I did not want to share. This was a bit of a hassle, as the phone itself was poor quality and required new minutes to be purchased every three months, so I stopped using it once my interviews were complete. However, it did make me feel safer, and I am still glad that some connections do not have my primary phone number. This primary number is a cell that is not listed online and is on the Do Not Call registry, so it would be difficult to find. I do not have a landline, but, if I did, I also would have unlisted that number to help better protect my personal information.

Attention to one's online presence is also particularly important in research on suspicious populations. I found it useful to assess whether my basic university or departmental information

would be confusing or upsetting to participants. For example, at one point a description on my department's website indicated I was broadly interested in social movements and crime and delinquency. One interviewee, probably willfully, misinterpreted this to mean I considered the militia to be a criminal organization and complained about it on the group's forum. Another member responded, joking that the complainant could be a delinquent if he wanted, but the rest of them fell under the social movements category; I posted and confirmed this interpretation. This example illustrates that it is sometimes difficult to balance long-term career concerns (in this case, descriptions of area interest) with shorter-term research goals (avoiding misinterpretations among my research population). It was necessary to temporarily change descriptions of my work on the departmental sites to meet both of these goals.

The widespread use of social networking sites may also pose special challenges for researchers of suspicious groups. Before entering the field, I ensured my Facebook security setting would protect my personal information and removed pictures and descriptions that I thought militia members might find problematic in an attempt to have redundant privacy security. I experienced glitches, however, when Facebook implemented major updates, and people who should not have been able to search for me successfully did so and old information related to my political affiliation, for example, that I removed months prior, suddenly reappeared without notice. Even with security settings and the removal of personal details or pictures, conscientious monitoring of what information social networking sites provide is therefore needed to ensure one's presence on these sites does not interfere with research goals. These sites may provide another source of data if participants want to "friend" you, so it is useful to include this possibility in IRB applications.

Other websites, including spokeo.com and ussearch.com, compile public information, making it easy to find everything from individuals' phone numbers to their home purchase prices. These sites will remove you from their public searches if requested, but this sometimes requires several weeks of processing time. New sites are created every few months, so it is important that researchers of suspicious groups be continually attentive to their online identities. I Google my name, phone number, email, and address approximately every three months to try to keep this information private; I additionally Google the same information for several family members, as some sites link information to spouses', parents', or even long-time roommates' listings, too. More frequent checking may be needed if one's departmental or other affiliations are in flux, as these sites tend to relist information when someone's address, last name, or other identity markers change.

CONNECTING WITH PARTICIPANTS

Despite researchers' best efforts preparing to enter the field, they have a new set of challenges once they obtain IRB approval and enter the fieldsite. In this section, I discuss how suspicious populations pose problems for gaining access and managing ideological disagreements, gendered expectations, and trusts tests. These issues may be present in other populations, but may more consequential with suspicious groups whose wariness of outsiders causes them to highly value signs of acceptance. I then discuss how researchers of suspicious groups must avoid looking or thinking like an undercover officer in the field, including avoiding obtrusive note taking, to avoid biasing data collection. Finally, I discuss how attention to personal safety while in the field with suspicious groups must be an ongoing process.

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Gaining Access and Establishing Rapport

Once research begins, all ethnographers must grapple with how to effectively gain access to their population. Access can be more problematic when groups are suspicious of outsiders because of their group ideology or activity. I found it particularly useful to play up my points of commonality with members, which I determined by viewing their publicly available materials. If I had not possessed a background with firearms, I could have opted for other, less central issues to illustrate commonality. Most members enjoy hearing about relatives' military stories, or watching or reading certain science fiction stories—a fact which is easily gleaned from militia materials—and it would have been simple enough to focus early conversation around these themes to initiate early interactions.

Appealing to even a minimal sense of commonality may be crucial for accessing suspicious groups who are reluctant to trust outsiders. Many of the media or other students whom I saw interact with the militia during my fieldwork admitted they had never seen a firearm in person, and sometimes were visibly nervous to even have conversations in their presence. With little variation, militia members responded to their questions only very generally, with information the interviewer could have learned from the militia's vast online presence. In part because I knew their vocabulary and in part because they felt more comfortable with my background, even very early in my fieldwork, the responses they gave me were more personal and meaningful, filled with "*I* think…" instead of only "the militia believes…", allowing me to better understand whether individuals had truly internalized militia ideology, or whether these were more the talking points learned after a period of membership that are designed for an uniformed and perhaps ill-intentioned outsider, which was most often the case.

One example of how the media's standoffishness toward the militia negatively impacted the information they received involved the information packets SMVM's leaders exchange monthly. The packets include several sheets of paper including any maps or other documents relevant for the month's planned training, and occasional meeting notes from the leadership meetings. These documents are nearly identical from month-to-month, and are made available to the other members on the forum, or if requested. The primary purpose of the packets seems to be to visibly mark who the leaders are at public functions, and to give them something to do that feels "official" or professional and organized.

During a storm of media attention in April 2010, one report included several lines in an article about the packets. A leader, trying to joke with the reporter after thirty minutes of prolonged, tedious explanation about gear, referred to them as "footballs," though the reporter still misunderstood and misidentified the leader's duffel bag as the item in question:

> But there is one small item that never leaves his truck: a green nylon satchel [he] jokingly calls "the football," a reference to the briefcase with codes for a nuclear strike kept close to the U.S. president. Inside, along with a pocket knife and a small first aid kit, is a sealed envelope containing codes, rallying points and detailed plans that [he] would use to mobilize his squad of armed citizen-soldiers in an emergency (Kelleher and Stoddard 2010).

The packets have been dubbed "footballs" ever since, and militia members still laugh about this incident, saying if they had "codes" or secret information to keep safe, they would not talk about it in front of reporters. They realized this was an opportunity to make fun of the suspicion and fear that many media representatives often displayed toward their group, and

thereafter made a show of exchanging the packets and faux-whispering, "Shh! This is secret!" when in front of other reporters and refusing to talk about them further, all while sharing the packets with me whenever I asked.

      I also found it useful to do research and be informed about the basic socio-political debates that were relevant for the militia at the time I started fieldwork. I tried to have something intelligent to say about both sides of these major issues in case my assessment had been wrong. For example, before attending my first meeting, I made sure to peruse the website and become familiar with both past and present concerns. I anticipated that members would be attuned to ongoing pre-Presidential election discussions, and made sure I knew the primary positions and criticisms of each major contender. In subsequent months, I took the time to be more informed than I would have otherwise been about other news items of likely interest ranging from local police action to Supreme Court cases, after the leader spent a considerable amount of time discussing the intricacies of the *Heller* case that first month, where the Supreme Court ruled that a man in Washington, D.C. did have a right to keep a firearm in his home for self-defense.

Fundamental Ideological Disagreements with Population of Interest
I do not agree with the militia's stance on several political issues, most typically those related to domestic and foreign social welfare. Although many qualitative scholars advocate always being completely honest, before entering the field, I decided I would not reveal my political perspectives as being largely very liberal. The personal safety implications of doing so were unclear at that time, but it was certain that this would prevent my ability to appear neutral and interested in the militia's own concerns. Most members fortunately assumed that my mere presence there meant I largely agreed with the group, and I was only ever asked directly about my political stance on three occasions.

      Each time, I was able to avoid directly answering by instead referencing a point of commonality. For instance, just days prior to the 2008 Presidential election, several members were talking during training about how they believed Obama's win was 'a done deal.' They were not happy about it, were hopeful that McCain would swing a surprise win, but thought it unlikely. One member commented that, if McCain won, he would expect massive rioting in Detroit and everyone should be prepared for that, just in case. After more banter back and forth, this member turned and asked me what I wanted to happen on Election Day. Instead of directly answering, I referenced his earlier conversation, saying, 'at this point, I'm more interested in seeing how people react.' By contextualizing this conversation with the group's broader ideological structure, I was able to answer honestly, if partially, while remaining silent about my political stance. No one objected, and my response gave the member exactly what he really wanted—an opening to further discuss his own concerns.

      While I empathize with scholars who state it is unethical to be anything less than fully honest in the field, it is important to recognize that it simply may not be possible to be completely honest 100% of the time while doing fieldwork, especially with suspicious groups. As Richard Mitchell notes, "When moralists and researchers claim to have acted in 'total honesty,' they are often speaking not of information exchanged but of affect, of the feelings they had for their subjects" (1993:7). In retrospect, I believe I could have identified my political stance during my first interaction with the militia with zero risk to my physical safety. However, I estimate that I would not have successfully contacted at least one-third of my interview participants had they believed me to have fundamental disagreements with their viewpoints; this estimate is based on the degree of importance these participants attributed to the political

affiliation or "like-mindedness" of their friends and acquaintances. Additionally, my entry to the field would not have been as quick, unhindered, or successful. I would have been left with a milder, and much less interesting and less accurate understanding of what Michigan militia members believe and hope to get out of their training.

Berk and Adams caution that researchers should always maintain their "poise" (1976) in the field if they see something that is upsetting. Their central point is that one should never panic or do anything that would offend your group's cultural values. While it is generally true that researchers should maintain their composure in the field, if a participant expresses acceptance of or does something the researcher finds objectionable, it may be not only perfectly reasonable, but methodologically useful to express objections. This of course must be tempered by whatever constraints researchers have previously set on their degree of disclosure about their own political and other ideology.

For example, prior to the 2010 interim elections, a man with local political aspirations attended several militia events in a failed attempt to garner their votes. During one prolonged conversation with me and two militia members, he expressed several opinions that not only failed to resonate with the members, but were increasingly offensive. He eventually claimed that there were Bible verses that completely justified the violent rhetoric of the Hutaree militia members who had recently been arrested for plotting to harm police officers. I am not religious, but knew the two militia members were, and I was running low on patience with this man's rambling interference with what I planned to accomplish in the field that day. I tersely pointed out that if individual Bible verses are used as the unit of analysis for promoting Christianity, there are several verses that contradict each other. The militia members immediately agreed with my assessment, added their own thoughts, and the would-be politician's involvement in the conversation soon came to an end.

It became clear that the militia members not only respected me for losing my detached poise in this context, but had actually been tempering their own critique of the speaker because they did not want to risk offending me. Letting my guard down essentially gave them permission to do so. I was able to see a more accurate reflection of their perspective on the topic as a result of my choice here, and was able to better understand how members' notion of chivalry might interfere with complete responses, especially in a group setting when other members were watching.

Similarly, some authors insist that fieldworkers should never take sides in any disagreement between group members, as that would risk offending someone (e.g., Berk and Adams 1976). However, if participants perceive the researcher as pandering, or unable to form their own opinion about an issue, they are likely to become wary. This is particularly true of suspicious populations that are already untrusting of outsiders, and true for any group in which political and other contemporary event discussions may be central. Maintaining a perpetual, detached indifference will likely only heighten distrust as participants are left with little choice but to assume that the researcher disagrees with them. Thus, researchers should not unnecessarily interject their views into conversations with participants, but if asked, should be prepared to answer within the constraints of disclosure they have established.

Harel Shapira, a sociologist whose forthcoming book examines the Minutemen who watch for illegal immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, had this experience when he initially hesitated to tell his participants of his Israeli background. Several participants suspected he was an undercover law enforcement agent, or a member of a volunteer group intent on monitoring Minutemen activity. Once he revealed his background, not only did this suspicion disappear, but

many members became *more* open with him because, as they reported, they respected Israel's struggle and their long military history (Shapira 2011).

Negotiating Gender

Navigating personal interactions may be particularly difficult when a female researcher is embedded with a predominantly male group, or vice versa. My gender was, overall, a great asset in gaining and maintaining access to the militia. Most members are men, but so are most law enforcement personnel (Justice Statistics 2000). This made it seem less likely that I was an undercover officer, and my gender also made it unlikely that I would be physically threatening, which may be the case with new male attendees. One member, for instance, told me that it took longer than he expected for him to be accepted in the group because his shaved head and work-out regimen 'made me look like I could either be an undercover cop, or a Neo-Nazi. They finally decided I wasn't either.'

Militia members highly value military involvement, but rarely expect it from women. Had I been a man, they would have demanded that I have more military knowledge, if not direct involvement, and a greater ability to "talk shop" about particular weapons and gadgets. They would have demanded that I fully participate in training exercises, and likely would have rejected my presence if I did not eventually assume at least some leadership responsibilities; most young men who became members during my fieldwork now occupy various leadership positions because long-term leaders pushed them to do so. Being a woman in this context allowed me to better avoid some boundary crossing with which I would not have been comfortable. It also better allowed me to be, or sometimes to feign being, ignorant in certain circumstances and thus receive more detailed explanations about weaponry and other gear, or about their understanding of current events than would have been acceptable if I were male.

At the same time, I had to quickly learn to negotiate a very male space. I cursed and bantered dirty jokes "like one of the guys," when some wanted to test how I would respond to sexualized comments. Any evinced embarrassment or discomfort would have indicated I was not sufficiently "cool" or emotionally strong enough to be in a male-dominated environment. Instead, I found it generally better to aggressively joke in return, and thereby bring an end to the conversation. For example, one member posted "10 Reasons Men Prefer Guns Over Women" on the forum, with a note jokingly addressed to me. All the reasons were highly sexualized and rooted in gendered stereotypes, such as, "If you admire a friend's gun and tell him so, he will probably let you try it out a few times." In response, I found and posted "10 Reasons Women Prefer Guns Over Men." This list was bawdier, made much more sense from a Freudian perspective, and included items like, "You can easily trade that snubby in for something with a longer barrel." Men at the next training complemented me on the find and laughed uproariously.

SMVM's leader proclaimed that I could handle whatever talk they threw at me, and the sexualized talk directed at me was much reduced after this post. Had I not passed this and other gender-based tests, I would not have been invited to several camping excursions and would have been unable to see how members interact with each other in a more private environment. I cannot claim that my presence did not still temper their language or conversation, but between ample discussion of their wives' and girlfriends' anatomies and even more frequent toilet humor, it is difficult to fathom that I missed out on very much.

Trust Tests and Attempts at Conversion

As the above scenario demonstrates, questions of access to suspicious populations may often have less to do with researchers' initial entry than how to ensure that participants at least minimally accept their presence such that the researcher receives an accurate understanding of the group. As part of this process, members of any population may engage the researcher in various "trust tests" (Lee and Renzetti 1990:520), whereby participants attempt to determine how reliable and honest the researcher is. At the first field exercise I attended, for example, I was asked to collect and keep up with the $5 entry fee for a competitive shooting event. This was ostensibly a test to see if I could be trusted to handle a small sum of money (about $250 total), but also served to test my basic math and interpersonal competencies as I interacted with each contestant. Although I was initially somewhat uncomfortable to be put in this role, I realized I needed to demonstrate my worth and realized this was an opportunity to interact with members from other areas I had not yet encountered in a way that made me seem cooperative and unthreatening.

Importantly, researchers can sometimes engage participants in trust tests, too. On a few occasions, for example, I made it known that I needed assistance locating certain interviewees or some piece of archival information. I noted which group members helped me, and this provided valuable information about which participants could be relied upon to do similar things in the future. Some researchers may feel this is ethically murky territory, but especially when dealing with a group that potentially has members who could exhibit violent or uncomfortable behavior, it is crucial to know what members you can minimally trust to be reliable and provide accurate information.

Some groups may attempt to "convert" the researcher to their cause as a test of trust or acceptance (Ayella 1990; Tavory 2010). The longer the researcher is embedded with a particular group, the more likely it is that they will have to express some degree of affinity toward the group. When I first began attending training events, for example, I was more than content to sit back and observe militia training exercises. Eight months into my fieldwork, and at the third training I attended, the primary training leader started to become visibly and verbally irritated that I did not participate. 'When are you going to get a rifle? You have to carry *something* [a borrowed rifle or shotgun] if you're going to go on this maneuver; you have to look the part.' I started doing minimal training—target shooting, going on maneuvers through the woods—to regain my status with him, and doing so allowed me to better understand what training means for members, and what resources were necessary for full participation in the groups' activities.

A few months later, another militia member very strongly encouraged me to go through the requisite training steps to become a militia member, saying, 'You've got a good group, you know you're dialed in [shooting accurately] today, why don't you go ahead and qualify[3]?' While I had been comfortable doing some training exercises with them, becoming a member was not something I desired. Had I expressed resistance to joining, however, I certainly would have lost access to the training exercises and to many of the members. Instead, I truthfully told them that my ability to appear an objective source of militia activity would be impaired by my membership. The member said that he felt like he had been misrepresented in a recent media report, so he respected and understood that position.

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[3] Qualifying means shooting at least 8 out of 10 shots in an 8 inch group at 100 yards without coaching. There are non-shooting requirements, too, such as walking 2 miles in full gear in 45 minutes or less, but these can be completed up to one month after the shooting qualifications are met.

I was not so successful in avoiding purchasing my own rifle during this time. SMVM's main leader often states that rifles are the most important weapon for home defense; this is inaccurate, and must be understood as an attempt to "justify" his enjoyment of target shooting with a rifle. Rifles are unwieldy in tight spaces, and are designed to be accurate at long distances of 50 yards or greater (depending on the rifle), not the much smaller distances that would be relevant for home and personal defense. Several militia members commented on this inaccuracy during our interviews, but did not interpret it as ineptitude or dishonesty on the leader's part. Instead, they believed he was merely trying to stress the importance of having "a variety of tools" when encouraging people to have a rifle for militia exercises, which are based around 100 yard shooting ranges. I had no desire to purchase or own a rifle, but eventually did buy one for use during the target shooting exercises when it became clear that I would likely be excluded from them if I continued to resist. The leader in question nodded approvingly at the first training after my purchase when another member excitedly observed, 'guess who joined the .223 club?' which referred to my new acquisition and the ammunition caliber most frequently seen among militia members.

Thus, it is prudent that researchers know before entering the field precisely what kinds of behaviors they would *not* be willing to do with their group of interest, and they should have well-reasoned explanations for their refusals prepared. It is probably wise to also plan responses for when participants decline to accept polite refusals. For example, when I discussed having presented some preliminary work from this project to peers, one militia member insisted that I invite people from my university to a conference room at his office building, so he could talk to them and tell them more about the militia. I declined, saying there were other forums for me to present my work. Several months later, however, in front his entire unit, this member claimed that I had been the one to make this suggestion but had not yet scheduled anything, in an apparent attempt to force such a meeting. This time, I appealed to his belief in a strong liberal academic bias, implying that I had raised the possibility with my liberal colleagues, but that there were not enough who were interested to merit putting together such a function. The member's pushing for this meeting then stopped.

Spies in Disguise?
Ethnographers and other qualitative researchers sometimes report that they feel like spies, rather than social scientists, when studying suspicious groups and being less than completely honest with members. Mitchell (1993) illustrates why this analogy is less than ideal. Among his reasons are: spies have a ideology to inject in the field, while researchers should want to be "ideologically naïve;" spies have a specific "mission," while researchers must be open to changing their interpretation of their participants; spies assume a moral superiority over their subjects, while researchers should never do so; and spies are institutionally supported, while researchers are much more often on their own in the event of funding problems or immediate danger (ibid. 46-52).

These critiques are all valid, but at least one important objection is missing here. If a researcher is thinking of her or himself as a spy, it seems their intent must be to uncover—and perhaps undermine—some insidious or intentionally hidden aspect of the group. While some groups may have carefully hidden and possibly dangerous components, it is unlikely that all groups do. Having this kind of mindset may make researchers miss a more complete and accurate picture of their group, by focusing on an element that is not representative of the overall population of interest, or may even make researchers perceive more danger or intrigue than is

really there (also see Lee 1994). Falling into the role of the spy may make it tempting to forego some of the trickier, nuanced areas of researching suspicious populations (e.g., gaining access, achieving an insider understanding), and to instead think more like a potential informant to law enforcement or some other authority trying to undermine the group.

Members of suspicious populations sometimes assume the researcher is a spy of sorts, from some branch of law enforcement and intent either on discovering the "truth" about the group, or on causing internal strife and disrupting the group, as happened to some organizations in the Civil Rights Movement (Cunningham and Browning 2004). It will always be the case that some members of a suspicious population will remain distrustful of a researcher's presence, but it has been my experience that militia members who suspect I could be an FBI agent or other law enforcement are often *more* forthcoming than others. They are adamant that they are operating legally, have nothing to hide, and want law enforcement to know that. One of my most valuable contacts, who has taken great pains to give me materials the group printed prior to the initiation of my research and access to members in other states, openly says that he still believes I might be a CIA agent[4]. While this cooperation first may seem counterintuitive, Leigh Payne mentions similar experiences when researching anti-government social movements in Latin America (2000), as has Harel Shapira, in his work on the Minutemen (2011).

Rather than try to persuade militia members that I have no such undercover motives, and in so doing, likely persuade them of the opposite, I find it better to simply joke with them, saying, "For all I know, *you* could be the fed," while again referencing their stated claim of transparency. I tell them the more insight they can provide, the more helpful it is for my work, but also for them if their goal is to have more people know what their group is truly about. Full trust is never guaranteed in research of this nature, nor should it be, but keeping potentially hostile interactions jovial and mutually beneficial is important for maintaining access. Interactions like these further indicate that good data can be obtained even when trust between researchers and participants is uncertain. Additionally, expressions of concern or uncertainty about the researcher's identity in the field should be understood as a source of data, as an indication that fear may work both ways in researching suspicious populations, and that participants may have more reasons to fear the researcher's actions than the researcher has reason to fear participants'.

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[4] Believing that I could be an undercover officer is not paranoia. An undercover FBI agent was instrumental in the arrests of Hutaree members, one of my key informants reported that an FBI agent acknowledged they sometimes send officers to other groups in the state to "keep an eye on things," and I have personally witnessed attendees who could only be undercover officers at several militia functions. They were usually two middle-aged, white men whom no one remembered seeing previously and who did not return to future events. In contrast to members' work clothes or casual tee-shirts, they wore plain, dark tee-shirts, khakis or dark slacks, waist-length jackets even when the weather is not cool enough to merit one (presumably to cover a sidearm tucked at the small of their back), and radios exposed at their belts. They typically arrived 20 minutes after the function's published start time and thereby avoided small-talk interactions with members. They never ordered any food or drink if the meeting was held at a restaurant and never asked questions (almost all other first-time attendees do both). They sat where they could observe the entire room, and made frequent eye contact with each other, but rarely with anyone else. When the undercover officers were particularly poor at being undercover, leaders openly said, 'and to law enforcement present tonight, welcome! Thank you for your service. We're glad to have you. Come talk to us after the meeting, we have some materials specially for you.' But I have never observed an undercover officer approach the leaders in this way; instead, they typically left around an hour after they arrived, again avoiding any one-on-one interactions with members.

Note Taking during Data Collection

One easy technique for avoiding looking like a spy is to be as casual as possible about data collection; as Berk and Adams say, "even subjects who appear completely to understand that the investigator will be gathering data, will sometimes be startled when the investigator permits the observer part of his [*sic*] role to become more salient" (1976:114). With suspicious groups in particular, any written records may seem like notes intended for law enforcement or other authorities and may alter participants' behavior. Mitchell's book on survivalists, for example, indicates that he and his partner were are aware of this issue and took notes only when they might be mistaken for another kind of writing during a sermon, or when they were alone in the bathroom, or in their trailer at night (2002:161).

I relied almost exclusively on my memory in the field, only very rarely scribbling a reminder word or phrase on a paper handed out at a public militia function, as opposed to taking a notepad with me. Emerson and his co-authors (1995) would undoubtedly say this is not the ideal, meticulous note taking, but some fieldsites may not allow for best practices. Especially early in my fieldwork, I found the 2 to 3 hour militia meetings, which usually started late in the evening, and the 6 to 10 hour (or longer) Saturday trainings to be both emotionally and physically exhausting as I tried to pre-evaluate every syllable I uttered to avoid offending or giving the wrong impression to militia members.

As a result, I generally typed up my fieldnotes (usually 7 to 15 single spaced pages, depending on the length and content of the event) the following day based on memory; this process usually took as long or longer than the militia event itself. I supplemented my recollection with the few jotted reminder words or phrases, whatever handouts leaders had, and pictures of training exercises that sometimes helped me remember a tactical maneuver a member demonstrated in the field, for example. I tried to recreate the exact phrasing of key lines to the best of my memory, gave more general descriptions of lengthy conversation and topics of interest, and always indicated in my notes where I thought I may not have remembered something precisely—items in a list of important field gear, for instance. It was often the case that several days following any given militia event, I would see something in the news or on Facebook that would remind me of something that had happened at the event but I had not yet put in my fieldnotes, and then I would do so.

For the first several months of my fieldwork, I used a digital voice recorder, kept in my bag or a coat pocket, to double check my memory of militia events. Unlike Mitchell Duneier's (1999) experience in his study of street vendors, I found this added very little if anything to my record, so only used the recorder when I was feeling very tired or ill, or otherwise felt my memory was not at its best. I never asked permission to record audio at these events because militia functions are open to the public, are held in public locations in the presence of non-militia people, and I deleted the recordings after confirming my recollection of events.

With participants' knowledge, I audio recorded interviews and took written notes. I told interviewees that I had terrible handwriting, which was true, and wanted to make sure I remembered exactly what they said in its full context to avoid unintentionally misconstruing their words. None of my 40 interviewees ever objected to being recorded. However, even here, the most interesting material came once the formal interview had ended. Though I framed my interview questions very open-ended and insisted that conversational tangents were welcome, it seemed that interviewees most often ceded control to me as an academic in this setting. With suspicious populations who may see themselves as unfamiliar with certain domains of social power, possibly including academia, it may be especially important to establish participants'

level of control. Encouraging militia members to start an interview with their general thoughts about their organization, for example, seemed most beneficial for obtaining interesting data.

Continuing Risk Management
With increased time embedded with a group, some authors indicate that researchers will face less physical danger, because, at the early stages, "…they are unlikely to have the degree of situational awareness that makes setting members competent at assessing potential dangers…in becoming culturally competent, the ethnographer also acquires the skills necessary to become aware of danger" (Lee 1994:74). However, I must disagree with this assessment. The longer one is in the field with suspicious groups in particular, the more predictable and safe they may seem. Researchers may be less wary in later stages of fieldwork of meeting new members than they were at earlier stages, and may not be as attuned to warning signs of potential trouble.

I realized during one of my later interviews, for example, that I had not done the same amount of research into the location an out-of-town interviewee suggested for our meeting as I would have done earlier in my study (it was in a more isolated area than I normally would have chosen), and I had left my cell phone in the car. Although my actions may have partially been a function of an increasingly accurate assessment of risk, in this particular scenario, I would have felt more comfortable had I followed my earlier, slightly more cautious procedures. It is important that researchers of suspicious groups be aware of their own perception of risk as their fieldwork continues. I also found it useful to have a support system of colleagues and friends who helped me assess my perception of risk and whether I was continuing to follow safety procedures that I established prior to the study's initiation.

DISENGAGING & REPORTING FINDINGS
After successfully navigating data collection, fieldworkers are presented with yet another set of challenges as they leave the field. In this section, I discuss how suspicious groups may be particularly concerned if researchers appear to leave the field too abruptly or completely. I then discuss how researchers of suspicious groups may have new challenges when their work enters the public sphere through academic publications and presentations or through media coverage; perhaps more than with other populations, suspicious groups may feel deceived or betrayed by researchers' conclusions, or may try to co-opt media attention for their own purposes.

Leaving the Field
All qualitative researchers face challenges in extracting themselves from their fieldsites at the conclusion of their studies. Researchers of suspicious groups may need to be especially careful to avoid the appearance of abruptly ending all contact with their populations of interest as this may be interpreted as a signal that the researcher has started distrusting the group, or has even started working with law enforcement. After three years of fieldwork, I stopped attending most training functions. I still live close enough to SMVM's monthly public meetings that I occasionally attend, and continue to exchange an infrequent email or forum post with some of my most important contacts across the state.

Most members seem unsurprised that I no longer regularly attend militia functions, and I believe that emphasizing my student status and desire to eventually leave Michigan throughout my time in the field helped with this. My most important contacts still send me friendly messages through Facebook, and I gave my personal (not pre-paid) phone number to these members so they could contact me quickly if something particularly interesting should happen

regarding the Hutaree members' upcoming trial, for example. Making myself at least minimally available in these ways seems to have helped curtail hurt feelings or members being frustrated that they cannot find me to ask questions about my work. Nonetheless, some members have remarked on my relative absence from these events, such as when one member semi-jokingly said, "I thought you decided you didn't like us any more!" when he saw me for the first time in several months.

Presentations & Publishing
Leaving the field is complicated when research findings enter the public sphere. Throughout my time in the field, I attempted to keep militia members informed about the content of and reception to my professional presentations. The leaders in particular like to know what I am talking about, and how people respond to the information. I continue to send my key contacts sections of what I have written in preparation for these presentations. I always ask members who read my work for their feedback, but make no promises that suggestions they make will be incorporated.

I rarely include the full text in what I send them since many leaders are offended, or pretend to be offended, by several sociology norms such as talking about socio-economic class, or discussing trends or "averages" across people who have strong self-images as highly unique individuals. Indeed, after the first writing sample they read, one person even objected to the term "leader." 'We don't have leaders," he said. "We have *coordinators*. No one here has to listen to anyone else.' I tired of having to repeatedly explain the reasons for including standard sociological language to the same people after each write-up and thus often leave background and literature sections out of what I send to militia leaders. Some still seem to know and accept that I continue to include this information in what I present, as was exemplified when one acknowledged, 'we don't agree with the way you say everything, but we understand you have to get a job, too.'

I generally change the pseudonyms I use for each person across papers that militia leaders read. This makes it more difficult for them to keep track of how I have described each person and makes it harder figure out who may have said something contrary to group ideology. In a single paper, I may use two pseudonyms for the same person if I reference some demographic characteristic that would uniquely identify them in one section of the paper, and also reference a story or quote that would violate other members' expectations of that person or otherwise potentially damage their relationship with others in the group. For example, in one paper I discuss two interviewees who said they voted for President Obama, which violates most members' expectations that the group supports politically conservative candidates. I used different names for these two interviewees in this description than when I describe their demographic characteristics (e.g., age, marital status, number of children) that might make them identifiable to other members. While I do everything possible to prevent members from identifying others (or even themselves) in potentially unflattering contexts, I cannot assume that I will succeed in producing full anonymity of militia members from one another (e.g., Stein 2010).

I delayed any substantial publication of my work until after my fieldwork was completed, and I never make the abstracts or full texts of my professional presentations available online. Most militia members do not seem to expect my writing to be uniformly positive of the group and its members. This was exemplified as one member acknowledged early in my fieldwork when I asked if there were people with racist tendencies involved in the militia that, "Yeah! We're a cross-section of society, so that cross section is going to be represented in our group."

However, I wanted to ensure my access for a time, and despite this understanding, it is difficult to predict exactly what may provoke a negative reaction from some members.

Near the end of my fieldwork, for example, I was invited relatively last-minute to be a discussant at a cross-disciplinary event at my university about accessing "sensitive" populations. I did not have time to notify militia leaders of my participation before Google alerted them of the event's title, and they posted it along with my name on the forum. One member remarked, "I didn't know I was sensitive. Is my voice getting higher [more effeminate]?" I responded that I had felt "nothing but welcome" in the group, but that some militia members I encountered still suspected I might be an undercover law enforcement officer or have a particular agenda to harm the group (also see Barker 1993). I said the talk was on how to address that issue, and that many people asked for more information on what the militia was, which was true and something the leaders could find flattering.

Even when the present paper is published, I am sure to receive some backlash from members. Most would likely be surprised to find that I disagree with their stances on domestic and social welfare policies. Some may be surprised to know that I did not desire to become a member, as I only really had that conversation with leaders. Whenever a militia member asked me a direct question, I answered truthfully, but sometimes partially as I discussed above, and some members (particularly those who are Christians) may be as offended by my omissions as they would have been by outright lies. One such member who was an especially useful source of information during my fieldwork complained of people who had spent time with them in the past and lied about the group later: "You can disagree with anything I say. You can be a hard line Democrat, or a hard line Communist and I will talk with you—politely—all day about why I think you're wrong. But the one thing I can't stand is liars." I am most concerned about this member's response to my publications, and hope that he does not feel I mislead him given the time and other resources he invested in assisting my work.

I did make some decisions in the field to protect my identity and safety that may be hurtful to some members. Other interpretive decisions I make in publications may be equally distasteful to them. However, it is ultimately my responsibility to accurately and completely represent the group as I experienced it, and I can only try to avoid misunderstandings through allowing leaders to sample my work prior to publication.

Blee (1998) wrote that, long after her research on them concluded, she continued to receive Supremacists' threats and promises that they were watching her work to make sure she represented them accurately. It is unlikely that anything I write would provoke a violent reaction from militia members for four reasons. First, I have tried to keep key leaders informed about my major interpretive decisions. Second, most of the modern groups in Michigan are not violence-oriented. Third, the few groups that are violent would likely direct any aggression toward other militia members who acted as "informants" about their problematic activities. Fourth, planned or actual violent activities are generally well-documented in the media and legal proceedings, and I would not be a unique or primary source of this information, especially since my work's main focus will continue to be the non-violent groups. Nonetheless, I plan to continue monitoring my online identity to ensure that certain personal information is difficult to access for several years, and to aim for continued awareness of how my publications may be perceived by relatively "mainstream" and fringe militia members alike.

Media Coverage

Another way a researcher's work may enter the public sphere is if it receives media attention, and modern technology brings new pressures when this is the case. In the past, a misspoken or misquoted phrase would have limited viewing; today, even many local papers are available online, and televised clips are seemingly permanently maintained on YouTube and other sites. Following general suggestions for media interactions—knowing the questions in advance, having a few lines about your research well-rehearsed, not being afraid to say "I don't know," for example—are all the more crucial. A bad interview may be taken as "evidence" of a researcher's "true" motives, which may provide an excuse for other groups to avoid interacting with that researcher. Media coverage may hinder future research projects if the researcher seems to portray their population of interest in a negative light, and may increase the danger the researcher faces in the field with suspicious groups in particular.

Two years after I entered the field, and after I had started presenting my findings, militia groups around Michigan received an unbelievable amount media attention, ranging from local to international coverage, when the Hutaree members were arrested. I observed more than 30 crews from around the world filming training and interviews with Michigan militia members in summer 2010, and participated in a number of interviews about my research on the group. Most outlets seemed to want me to uniformly vilify the militia movement as had several recent watch group reports (e.g., SPLC 2010). Instead, I tried to emphasize that there could be vast ideological differences across militia groups, and that most groups were comprised of well-intentioned, law-abiding citizens, rather than government-hating mercenaries as some reports claimed. I indicated that most militia members would not be recognizable as such in their daily lives unless they happened to be wearing their militia t-shirts (which they purchase from sites like cafepress.com that let you import an image and order a customized shirt for around $20).

Militia members generally appreciated my attempt to bring nuance to the analysis of their organization. A leader who until that time remained very skeptical of my continued presence in the group begrudgingly said, 'Nice job selling those tee-shirts' as a way to express appreciation that I had not used the media forum as an opportunity to lambast the group without outright acknowledging the content of my presentation. Another leader who became the de facto media representative for SMVM often requested that reporters talk to me "for a different perspective on the group," and many did so. Self-proclaimed militia members from other states occasionally posted comments on the YouTube clips of my interviews, thanking me for my "honest portrayal."

I was happy to not have offended my primary contacts in the militia movement, but was rather surprised by the overall positive response. I was still careful to note in the interviews, for example, that there were racist individuals inside the movement even though race was not an organizing principle for most of the groups in Michigan. While some leaders had acknowledged this early in my work, other members worry that any negative statement about the group will be imputed to all its members. It is likely that most militia members who were unhappy with my media comments simply kept their thoughts to themselves, rather than sharing them with me in person or online; however, I have witnessed them interpret other reports on the group in a very positive light when it is not clear than an uninformed outsider would do so.

One prominent member of a group more ideologically similar to the Hutaree than others in the state did respond negatively to one of my interviews. His is the group mentioned in my fieldnotes at the beginning of this manuscript. In the interview he disliked, I commented that both militia groups and government entities needed to be less reactionary and better informed

when dealing with one another. I mentioned that the government should not release reports like that from the Department of Homeland Security (2009) on "right-wing extremists" with language that would provoke a response from potentially violent groups—a response that should be perfectly predictable when working with an accurate understanding of militias and other conservative groups. The member posted that I only said the government should not release reports like that, not that they should not produce them, and this must mean that I thought the report was an accurate reflection of the militia. This member has a reputation for being reactionary and trying to cause trouble even within the movement, so while I could not help but be concerned that his response might negatively impact my reputation with some others in the militia, it seemed that most dismissed his accusation as no one else ever mentioned this to me.

CONCLUSION

Although I have chosen examples to illustrate the methodological points from my own work on the Michigan militia, the challenges here are relevant to work on other groups who are difficult to access, study, or report on because of a perceived cost to participating in research, which is often rooted in the groups' wariness toward outsiders. Suspicious populations may have objective reasons for being wary of outsiders, especially of academics who may often find themselves at ideological odds with these groups' interests. As a result, fieldwork with suspicious populations poses special challenges during each phase of research.

When planning research, my experience has been that traditional standards for phrasing interview questions appropriately so as to avoid offending participants are even more crucial when studying suspicious groups. Similar standards for participant compensation may not so readily apply to suspicious groups, whose members may question researchers' funding sources, or who may be offended by the notion of being paid to help with a project. IRB guidelines for interacting with participants may also be less than ideal when interacting with suspicious populations, and researchers of these groups cannot rely on IRBs as an authority on participants' potentially illegal or dangerous behavior. Researchers should prepare realistically, but cautiously and for worst-case-scenarios when planning research with suspicious populations. As part of this process, protecting personal boundaries may require more forethought with research on suspicious groups as this may be an important part of managing danger in the field.

When in the field, I found it useful to play up points of commonality—even if seemingly minor—when gaining access and rapport. People generally enjoy talking about themselves, and points of commonality provide an early, relatively risk-free opportunity to do so. When members of suspicious groups hold ideas that the researcher finds unpalatable, or when the group itself is organized around political or other principles with which the researcher disagrees, it may be especially important to know when and how to divert conversations away from uncomfortable topics, but equally important to learn when to push back, to reveal one's opposing stance, and perhaps even to lose one's poise. Participants will be distrustful of researchers who claim to be completely neutral with no opinions, especially if the group is organized around political or other strong principles. These groups may have strong expectations about gender roles, and this, too, provides opportunities for researchers to sometimes challenge those boundaries, and to sometimes use the stereotypes to your advantage, depending on what circumstances and data goals allow.

In the field, suspicious groups may be more likely than others to use trust tests to determine researchers' honesty or loyalty, or to expect signs of conversion, and researchers should be prepared to handle these situations and respond within the personal guidelines they

established in the planning phase. However, it is important to remember that trust may be overrated in research with these groups. Good data can be obtained even without full trust, even when some participants suspect you may be a "spy," or undercover officer. It is important that researchers avoid behaviors that could contribute to their image as spies in the field, as this undoubtedly hinders data they will gather as well as their mental approach to the fieldsite. One way to do this is to noticeably take notes only when it makes sense to do so in the context of other group activity—when others are writing down directions or other information, for example. Regardless of the degree of apparent acceptance or familiarity researchers eventually establish with participants, it is important that they remain vigilant about their own safety and risk management standards throughout their time in the field, and having colleagues or friends who help them remain accountable to their own plans is useful for this process.

      After leaving the field, researchers must be aware of how their work will impact both participants and themselves once it reaches the public sphere. It is probably best to avoid abrupt, complete departures from the fieldsite when possible, to decrease the chances of participants' questioning researchers' motives and thereby undermining connections they have established that may still be useful as analysis, writing, and presenting take priority. Curtailing hurt feelings and possible safety concerns may be possible through allowing participants to selectively read one's work prior to publication, but it may be inevitable that some participants are offended or disagree with researchers' assessments of the group as research is published or presented in either academic or media forums. With media presentations seemingly-permanently preserved online, and with increasing online access to academic sources, it is probably naïve to assume that participants of qualitative projects do not read what researchers write about them. This is particularly true of suspicious populations who are attentive both to newcomers and they are portrayed in the public sphere.

      Just as it is important to plan interview questions, access strategies, and safety management before entering the field, it is important that researchers of suspicious populations think about how their work will be presented and received even while they are in the early stages of their research. This allows time to develop a strategy for obtaining feedback from participants and to be best prepared for how whatever backlash the work may receive. It is impossible to plan for all possible outcomes with any research population. With suspicious groups, however, increased preliminary research and attention to detail at each phase of the research process makes researchers feel more secure in their personal safety while in the field, and leads to more complete and accurate data.

      Continued dialogue about strategies in the field with suspicious groups is needed to improve researchers' success and safety in the field. These groups continue to be understudied, in part because of the challenges they present to accessing, empathizing with (in *Verstehen* fashion), and reporting on them. Only with attention to challenges at each stage of the research process can improvements be made regarding how researchers approach their fieldsite, preserve their own safety , and present findings that help us better understand the entirety of the social world.

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