

Appendix: The Method of Ethnographic Network Analysis

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This study combines “thin” quantitative analysis of network measures and structures with “thick” qualitative descriptions of network processes. This mixed method, which I call ethnographic network analysis, combines the precision and measurement validity of social network analysis with deep, contextual knowledge of a specific case. The disciplined configurative case presented in the preceding chapters draws on theories and concepts in a number of areas, including radicalization, resilience, adaptation, communities of practice, and de-radicalization, to explain how the Emigrants experience these processes and outcomes.¹ This appendix describes the research procedures used to collect and analyze the data for this case study. I begin with the methods and measures Stephen Coulthart, Dominick Wright and I use for the formal network analysis presented in [Chapter 1](#) before describing the interviews and observational data I draw on throughout the book.

The data for our formal network analysis on al-Muhajiroun come from news reports. We purposively sampled these articles from Lexis Nexis Academic using a variety of search terms.² These search terms included various spellings of al-Muhajiroun and the names of different spin-off groups, including the

¹ For more on disciplined configurative case studies, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 75; Alexander L. George, “Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparisons,” in *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1979), ed. Paul Gordon Lauren, pp. 43–68; and Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in *Strategies of Inquiry*, Vol. 7 of *The Handbook of Political Science* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1975), eds. Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, pp. 79–138.

² Lexis Nexis is an electronic database that contains full-text articles from over 200 newspapers throughout the world beginning in 1980. Details from this and the following paragraphs are taken from Michael Kenney, John Horgan, Cale Horne, Peter Vining, Kathleen M. Carley, Michael W. Bigrigg, Mia Bloom, and Kurt Braddock, “Organisational Adaptation in an Activist

Saved Sect, Islam4UK, and Muslims Against Crusades. Using the search terms our assistants gathered over four thousand newspaper articles from Lexis Nexis. When reviewing this initial dataset, however, we discovered that it contained hundreds of duplicate articles and “false positives.” The duplicate articles came from identical wire service reports that appeared in numerous publications in the Lexis Nexis database. False positives came from articles that appeared under one of our search terms, such as the Saved Sect, but whose content was not related to al-Muhajiroun. We cleaned the dataset by removing these duplicates and false positives. This produced a final dataset of 3,306 articles published in over sixty newspapers from 1996 through November 2012.

Reflecting al-Muhajiroun’s substantive importance in the United Kingdom, most of these articles came from British publications. However, other countries with publications in the final dataset included Canada, China, Ireland (and Northern Ireland), Israel, Malaysia, New Zealand, Russia, Scotland, Singapore, and the United States. We made no attempt to sample or “balance” our selection of newspaper articles according to different publications’ political leanings. If the non-duplicate article about al-Muhajiroun or its activists appeared in an English-language newspaper in Lexis Nexis during the years in our sampling frame we included it in our dataset. The dataset contained publications from across the political spectrum, including those that are often identified as “conservative” (*The Daily Mail*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*), “liberal” (*The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent*), and “moderate” (BBC Monitoring-International Reports). We did not include articles from non-English sources because our network mining tool, AutoMap, works only with English-language text.

After creating the dataset of newspaper articles for our social network analysis, we separated the articles into three time periods corresponding to major events in the Emigrants’ history (see [Table 1.1](#)). The next step was to create a thesaurus or list of activists, people who participated in al-Muhajiroun or one of its successor groups, either as administrative or intellectual affiliates ([Chapter 3](#) discusses the meaning of these terms). Because the results of our social network analysis would depend on the accuracy of our thesaurus, we devoted considerable effort to creating the cleanest list of activists or “agents” we could, based on our understanding of al-Muhajiroun. We revised the thesaurus by verifying that each person on our list was administratively or intellectually affiliated with the Emigrants based on their involvement in network activities. After removing false positives, our final thesaurus contained 364 unique nodes or agents.

We then processed the newspaper data in each time period with our refined thesaurus using AutoMap, a content analysis program that extracts networks

from texts.³ AutoMap generates a network based upon the proximity of agents in the thesaurus that appears in the same text, depending on a user defined “window.” The extraction settings we used connected individuals who were mentioned in the same news report, irrespective of the number of words between them. If two agents were mentioned in the same report, we coded them as being connected regardless of their location in the article.⁴ This allowed us to create a bipartite proxy network of al-Muhajiroun activists for each time period based on their connections with each other in the news reports. We used news reports as the source of our relational data because a detailed account of associations among the Emigrants across all three periods was not available. We treat the networks that emerge from our newspaper data as proxies for al-Muhajiroun, but we recognize that they do not capture all the social relationships in the real network. We also recognize, as emphasized in [Chapter 1](#), that the proxy networks are smaller than the real networks for each period because news reports about the Emigrants typically do not name rank-and-file activists.

Once we extracted proxy networks from the news reports for each of the three time periods, we uploaded each network into the Organizational Risk Analyzer (ORA) program to calculate the node and network-level measures. Like other international relations scholars, we use degree centrality at the node-level of analysis to measure access power and betweenness centrality to measure brokerage power. At the node-level, degree centrality refers to the sum of the value of ties between the node being measured and all other nodes in the network. Nodes that rank high on this measure have more connections to other nodes in the same network.⁵ Node-level betweenness centrality measures the number of shortest paths that pass through a node in the network. It measures the extent to which a node is the most efficient path between other nodes in

³ Kathleen M. Carley, Dave Columbus, Michael Bigrigg, and Frank Kunkel, *AutoMap User's Guide 2011*, Technical Report, CMU-ISR-11e108 (Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University, School of Computer Science, Institute for Software Research, 2011).

⁴ We adopted this setting after experimenting with various window sizes that produced unrealistically sparse networks. Some might object that our approach is likely to produce false positives, connecting agents that should not be connected. We cannot discount this possibility entirely. However, we do not believe this is a significant source of error in our extraction process, given the “cleanliness” of our thesaurus, which contains few, if any, individuals who were not involved with the Emigrants at some point. The false positives that appear in [Chapter 1](#), including Abu Hamza al-Masri, Afzal Munir, Aftab Manzoor, and Mohammed Omar, were affiliated with the activist network. Their high rankings for node-level degree and betweenness centrality reflect their appearance in many news reports, usually due to their involvement in political violence, rather than their prominence in the network. For more discussion on this and related issues, see Michael Kenney and Stephen Coulthart, “The Methodological Challenges of Extracting Dark Networks: Minimizing False Positives through Ethnography,” in *Illuminating Dark Networks*, edited by Luke M. Gerdes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 52–70.

⁵ Each node's degree centrality is the normalized sum of its row and column degrees, as calculated on the network's node-by-node matrices. For more on node-level degree centrality and how it is interpreted in ORA, see Kathleen M. Carley, Jeffrey Reminga, Jon Storricks, and Dave

the network. Nodes that score high in betweenness centrality often serve as brokers, connecting otherwise poorly connected nodes.⁶

At the network-level of analysis we use degree centralization, betweenness centralization, average path length, and the clustering coefficient to measure centralization and clustering. Network-level degree centralization measures the extent to which all the network's connections are concentrated in one or several persons, while betweenness centralization calculates the extent to which the shortest paths between nodes are concentrated in one or more persons. The average path length of a network refers to the average number of nodes that must be crossed in the shortest path between any two nodes in the network.⁷ A small path length means that the network is cohesive because, on average, it takes few steps to cross from one end of the network to the other. Conversely, the clustering coefficient measures "clumpiness" or bunching across the network by averaging the density of each node's ego network. Networks with high clustering coefficients contain numerous tightly-knit clusters.⁸

In addition to measuring centrality and clustering within al-Muhajiroun, we also seek to determine whether the activist network is scale-free, small-world, or something else. We use aggregate measures of network structure for this, including different algorithms that place the observed al-Muhajiroun networks on a continuum of possible values for node degree and clustering. Our first aggregate test determines whether the network is scale-free by examining its relative distribution of node degree. Node degree is a count of all connections the node shares with other nodes in the network. The relative frequency of node degree produces a distribution that can be analyzed to see how closely it follows a power law, a signature feature of scale-free networks.⁹ According to Clauset, Shalizi, and Newman,¹⁰ a value x follows a power law distribution if it is drawn from a probability distribution:

$$p(x) \propto x^{-\alpha} \quad (1)$$

Columbus, *ORA User's Guide 2011*, Carnegie Mellon University, School of Computer Science, Institute for Software Research, Technical Report, CMU-ISR-11e107 (2011).

⁶ The betweenness centrality of a node is defined as: Across all node pairs that have a shortest path containing the node, the percentage that pass through that node. This is calculated on node-by-node matrices. For more on betweenness centrality and how it is measured in ORA, see Carley *et al.*, *ORA User's Guide 2011* (2011). For a broader discussion of betweenness centrality, see Linton C. Freeman, "Centrality in Social Networks: Conceptual Clarification," *Social Networks* 1, no. 3 (1979), pp. 215–39.

⁷ Duncan J. Watts, "Networks, Dynamics, and the Small-World Phenomenon," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (September 1999), p. 498; Carley *et al.*, *ORA User's Guide 2011* (2011); and Thomas W. Valente, *Social Networks and Health: Models, Methods, and Application*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁸ Valente, *Social Networks and Health*.

⁹ Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Aaron Clauset, Cosma Rohilla Shalizi, and M. E. J. Newman, "Power-Law Distributions in Empirical Data." *SIAM Review* 51, no. 4 (2009), p. 662.

The exponent, α , is a scaling parameter that shapes the distribution and tends to fall in the range $2 < \alpha < 3$, with some exceptions. Determining whether an observed distribution exhibits the properties of a power law involves estimating alpha using a maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) procedure. Clauset and his co-authors suggest a two-step procedure that we use.¹¹ The first step is to estimate a value for alpha that applies to the observed distribution. The next step is to compare the observed distribution of α against a simulated distribution for the same parameter. If the observed and simulated distributions are not different and the estimated alpha is within range, we consider the observed distribution to follow a power law and the network to be scale-free. If the observed and simulated distributions are not significantly different, but the estimated alpha falls outside the range $2 < \alpha < 3$, we consider the network to be “scale-free-like.” We discuss this “likeness” category in [Chapter 1](#).

Our second aggregate test measures whether an observed network exhibits small-world properties as described by Watts and Strogatz.¹² Small-world networks are characterized by shorter average path lengths and higher clustering than distributed networks of similar size. When two nodes have connections with one another and they share connections with a third node, a relational triangle forms between them. This is a form of clustering that can be measured. A high degree of clustering occurs when a node’s connections in a network form more triangles than found in distributed networks.

In their seminal contribution, Watts and Strogatz show how the simple process of rewiring a ring lattice creates small-world networks characterized by high clustering coefficients and short path lengths, which can be expressed in a small-world quotient.¹³ Their contribution has been valuable, but it also produced a broad class of networks that are considered small worlds. In response, Humphries and Gurney created a more nuanced measure, one that builds on Watts and Strogatz but proposes a continuous measure of small-world

¹¹ Few empirically observed distributions conform to a power law throughout their entire range of x values. This makes it necessary to inspect the observed frequency distribution (e.g., as a histogram) and to determine where to set the “floor” that defines the subset of x values that follow a power law. Fitting a power law to the distribution provides an estimate for alpha to use as a starting point for the maximum likelihood estimation procedure. In our case, we supply several measures to the “igraph” R package and its `power.law.fit` function, including x , x as a discrete value, the x -range floor, and the prior estimate of α . This produces an MLE for alpha in the form of $\hat{\alpha}$, along with an evaluation for statistical significance difference between the observed distribution and a power law distribution simulated according to $\hat{\alpha}$.

¹² Duncan J. Watts, and Steven H. Strogatz, “Collective Dynamics of ‘Small-World’ Networks,” *Nature* 393, no. 6684 (1998), pp. 440–2.

¹³ Also known as a “regular” network, a ring lattice is a structure with nodes arranged in a circle. Connections between nodes occur among immediate neighbors as well as neighbors that are one path length away. Beginning with a ring lattice and rewiring its connections with probability p progressively produces a random network as p nears one.

indicators.¹⁴ Like Watts and Strogatz, Humphries and Gurney derive their measure of small-world properties by comparing an observed network, nw_g , to a random network with the same number of nodes and ties, nw_{rand} . This measure consists of three components. The first component is Humphries and Gurney's version of clustering, C^A . This is a ratio with three times the number of triangles in a network in the numerator and the total number of path lengths equal to a length of two in the denominator.¹⁵

$$C_i^A = \frac{3 \times \text{number of triangles}}{\text{number of paths of length 2}} \quad (2)$$

The second component is a clustering ratio, which places the clustering value for nw_g in the numerator and the clustering value for nw_{rand} in the denominator.

$$\gamma_g^A = \frac{C_g^A}{C_{rand}^A} \quad (3)$$

The third component begins with the mean value of the minimum path length between all node pairs in a network, L_g , and then combines them to form a ratio.

$$\lambda_g = \frac{L_g}{L_{rand}} \quad (4)$$

These three components are then combined to create a metric of "small-world-ness," essentially a ratio of ratios.

$$S^A = \frac{\gamma_g^A}{\lambda_g} \quad (5)$$

According to Humphries and Gurney, a network is small-world if $S^A > 1$. We use this same definition while making a change to their procedures. Rather

¹⁴ Mark D. Humphries and Kevin Gurney, "Network 'Small-World-Ness': A Quantitative Method for Determining Canonical Network Equivalence," *PLoSOne* 3, no. 4 (2008), pp. 1–10. Brian Uzzi and Jarret Spiro develop a similar continuous measure of small-world-ness, which they call "small world Q." See Brian Uzzi, and Jarrett Spiro, "Collaboration and Creativity: The Small World Problem," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 2 (2005), p. 470.

¹⁵ Watts and Strogatz use a slightly different measure for clustering:

$$c_i^{WS} = \frac{2E_i}{k_i(k_i - 1)}$$

Here, c_i^{WS} is the clustering value for node i , which is two times the number of connections shared among its neighbors divided by the degree of i times its degree minus one. The quantity produces marginally different behavior than the clustering measure defined by Humphries and Gurney.

than calculating a single score based upon comparison to only one random network, we calculate an average small-world score drawn from a comparison of 1,000 random simulations. This adds confidence to our final assessment of al-Muhajiroun's "small-world-ness." If a network's Humphries-Gurney score is less than but within one standard deviation of 1, we consider the network to be "small-world-like."

ETHNOGRAPHY AND PROCESS TRACING

The formal network analysis in this study allows us to measure, with some degree of precision, node and network-level centrality and clustering, and to see how network relationships and structures change over time. This, however, is only part of the book's explanation. The preceding chapters also explain why activists decide to join the network, how they learn its Salafi-Islamist ideology, how they become committed insiders in its community of practice, and why they eventually decide to leave.

Answering these questions requires an additional method of analysis, one that complements the "thin" method above to produce "thick," ethnographic network analysis. This approach, combined with process tracing, allows me to peer inside the outlawed network, to understand how activists acquire knowledge, how they make decisions, and how they change their activities in response to feedback. My attempt to understand the beliefs and behaviors of the members of this cultural group through thick description is what makes this ethnography.¹⁶ But the ethnography remains deeply informed by network theory and analysis. Throughout this book, I draw on the measures of centrality and network structure to inform my interpretation of al-Muhajiroun. Finally, my effort to trace the complex processes through which individuals make decisions, and the network performs collective action, is what makes this study process tracing.¹⁷ All this methodological scaffolding should not obscure an important point: My goal in interpreting the Emigrants and understanding the processes behind their activism is not to aid or empower them. Nor is it to give them a platform to propagate their views. Rather, taking my cue from Clifford Geertz, my goal is to understand them, to make them accessible to outsiders, to reveal their normality without sacrificing their particularity.¹⁸

¹⁶ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2007), p. 68; Michael Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

¹⁷ For more on process tracing, see Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 106–9; George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, pp. 6–7, 205–32; and Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Process Tracing: From Philosophical Roots to Best Practices," in *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, edited by Bennett and Checkel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 1–37.

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 14.

Gaining insight into cultural practices like da‘wah and hisbah, and processes like radicalization and learning, requires access to cultural data that capture the beliefs and behaviors of those being studied, and the ability to trace the processes by which they acquire them. Knowledge of these cultural facts is not randomly distributed within a given population. It is shared among certain people, some of who know more about the beliefs and behaviors than others. As I emphasize in the introduction to this book, one of the biggest challenges in studying radicalization and political violence is accessing respondents who can discuss these phenomena, accurately and reliably. That chapter also tells the story of how I gained access to al-Muhajiroun.

Once they opened their world to me, these activists allowed me to make the most of my seven research trips to Britain, between November 2010 and July 2015. During these trips, and with the help of my initial “seeds,” who served as both respondents and gatekeepers to other activists, I used snowball and convenience sampling to build a respondent pool of forty-eight activists, with whom I conducted ninety-seven interviews. These respondents represented a diverse cross-section of al-Muhajiroun activists, including eight leaders, eleven veterans with years of experience in the network, and twenty-nine rank-and-file “dai’s” or proselytizers who carried out much of the Emigrants’ day-to-day activism. In exchange for allowing them to engage in da‘wah with me, many of these individuals took the time to answer my questions and tell me their stories.

Did these respondents always tell me the truth? After all, as members of an outlawed network, they had plenty of incentives to downplay their involvement in al-Muhajiroun. At times during my field work I encountered activists who did just that. However, given that I was usually interviewing them at their da‘wah stalls and protests, or while we were hanging out with their fellow activists at restaurants and the network’s centers, most of these respondents did not deny their association with the Emigrants or their participation in high-risk activism. Instead, most of the deceptions I confronted revolved around specific matters, such as one young activist who, rather curiously, lied about his age, only to be challenged by another activist. Another respondent, perhaps more understandably, denied he had been arrested at a certain protest, even though I had been at the demonstration myself and the media had already reported his arrest. Fortunately, these incidents were outliers. Some activists did try to deceive me, but most of them were honest with me most of the time.

There are several reasons for this. The first has to do with the context in which my interviews occurred. As I describe in [Chapter 2](#), numerous interviews took place as activists fulfilled their divine obligation to engage in da‘wah. They understood that intentionally lying about themselves during these conversations would be a sin for which they would be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. Under these circumstances, it was better for them not to lie, to avoid the wrath of Allah, and their fellow activists. A second factor that minimized

deception had to do with how I conducted the interviews. Before each discussion, I asked my respondents to avoid talking about anything that made them uncomfortable. If they didn't want to answer a question, I encouraged them to move on to the next one. My strategy was to make it easier for them to skip over an unwelcome query than to fabricate a deceptive response. Some respondents exercised this option by refusing to answer certain questions, usually having to do with internal administrative matters. When faced with these refusals I did not press the point, but quickly moved on to the next question.

A third factor minimizing deliberate deception in interviews had to do with the relationships I built with my gatekeepers and many respondents. These were not one-off interviews. They were part of a larger data-gathering process, involving multiple trips to London. Potential respondents could see and verify for themselves my presence and the purpose of my visits. By the time I asked them for an interview, many respondents had already seen me hanging out with other activists, they had seen me observing and taking notes at their da'wah stalls and protests, and they had seen me engaging with gatekeepers who were often the leaders of their local halaqahs. To recall one story I told in the Introduction, respondents understood that it was okay to talk with me because, as one gatekeeper put it, "We have a relationship."¹⁹

Another important set of respondents for this book were the former activists who left al-Muhajiroun after being involved in its high-risk activism for years. These "formers" were among the most difficult respondents to access. Apart from a handful of individuals who now make their living countering the same narratives they once championed, former activists are often reluctant to discuss their adolescent involvement in al-Muhajiroun. This makes it hard to track them down and even harder to get them to agree to an interview. Of course, difficult does not mean impossible. Through my research contacts within and outside al-Muhajiroun, I identified and located a number of former activists. When they agreed to be interviewed, and not all of them did, these respondents were full of rich insights about their own journeys to and from the Emigrants and how the network worked when they were still involved.

Unlike activists who were still in the network, no questions were off-limits to the formers. They provided details on internal administrative affairs I could not get from active supporters, such as the attempted overthrow of Anjem Choudary by leaders of the network's halaqah in Whitechapel. Salman, who told me about the coup attempt and whose journey I document throughout this book, is a case in point. When I first interviewed him he was deeply involved in the Whitechapel halaqah, leading da'wah stalls in Bethnal Green and even forming his own network platform, Call2Tawhid. When I ran into him years later, largely by chance, he had long since left al-Muhajiroun and its controversial hisbah, but he was reluctant to give me another interview. After following up with him through several phone calls, which unfolded over the course of

¹⁹ Field notes, Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010.

two separate trips to Britain, I eventually persuaded him to give me another. My efforts were not in vain. Salman was as candid with me as a former as he had been as an activist, only now I had the benefit of interviewing him both at the height of his activism and afterwards, when his views had changed dramatically.

In addition to interviewing activists and former activists, I also interviewed forty-one people who were not personally involved in al-Muhajiroun, but who followed the network's activism, from different perspectives. These included United States and British law enforcers and security officials, academics and think tank researchers based in London, former Hizb ut-Tahrir activists now working on countering violent extremism, and fifteen quietist Salafis from a mosque in Brixton that clashed repeatedly with the Emigrants. In all, I conducted 148 interviews with ninety-seven people within and outside al-Muhajiroun.

All these interviews followed a semi-structured format. This allowed me to ask respondents standard questions focused on the major themes of my research, while giving me the flexibility to pursue different leads as they developed during the interviews. Most of my respondents, including all of the Emigrants, let me record their interviews on my audio recorder. When respondents, usually government officials, did not give me permission to tape their interviews, I took extensive hand-written notes. I converted these notes into electronic form on my computer as soon as possible after the interview, while the conversation was still fresh in my mind. When observing da'wah stalls, demonstrations, and other events, I recorded my impressions in a paper note pad and took photographs on my camera. I later expanded on these field note jottings when converting them into electronic form on my laptop, often at the end of a long day of field work.

When I returned home from periodic trips to London, I arranged for my audio files to be converted into verbatim texts by professional transcribers and graduate students. I carefully checked and corrected each transcript against the original audio files before uploading them to NVivo, the software program I used to code and analyze these data. Through a reiterative process of reading, coding, and reflecting on the interview transcripts, field notes, and hundreds of additional documents, I gradually created a coding index that contained two thousand themes and sub-themes. Some of these themes, including adaptation, leadership, and social networks, were based on research questions and hypotheses I had before entering the field. Others, like *suhba*, *hisbah*, and the covenant of security emerged from my respondents. Consistent with a "grounded theory" approach to field work and qualitative analysis, these concepts were generated by the people who experienced them. They were essential in helping me understand in their own terms how the Emigrants engaged in high-risk activism.²⁰

²⁰ For more on grounded theory, see John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), pp. 62–8; and Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine, 1967). For more on qualitative coding, see Lyn Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, 3rd edition (London: Sage, 2015), pp. 109–15.

As important as the interviews were to my research, early on in my field work I realized that the best way to learn about the Emigrants was not just to talk with activists but to watch them perform their activism. Over the four-and-a-half year period of my field work, I spent hundreds of hours observing activists in their “natural setting” at twenty-four separate da‘wah stalls, demonstrations and other events, and from hanging out with them at restaurants and two different indoctrination centers in East London. As I walked around their rallies I read their protest signs and asked them questions about their ideology and political grievances. At their da‘wah stalls I encouraged them to preach to me and I engaged them in cheerful debates about the meaning of life. At their centers I bantered with them while we waited for private talks to begin and I talked with them some more when the talks were over. At local cafés and restaurants I commiserated with them about the weather and the Tube’s latest service delays while sipping coffee or breaking bread.

Watching respondents in action helped me understand what they were telling me in their interviews. Numerous activists talked about hierarchy in our taped-recorded discussions, but first-hand observation showed me the network’s hierarchy in action, allowing me to see how veterans directed the rank-and-file at demonstrations, and which leaders arrived late to deliver their speeches. During interviews respondents gamely answered my questions about learning, but direct observation showed me how activists actually learned their activism by doing it: handing out leaflets, waving protest signs, yelling chants at passersby. During their interviews, respondents highlighted the importance of face-to-face discussions with their peers, but hanging out with them let me view these interactions first-hand, to see for myself how they enhanced the network’s fellowship and in-group radicalization. Observing activists in action allowed me to draw inferences from what they actually did and not just what they told me.²¹

Spending time with activists at da‘wah stalls and sharing meals with them at kebab shops helped me build the trust and rapport that is so essential to ethnography. This resulted in richer interactions and more candid interviews. “Only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust can one begin to ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful, serious answers,” writes Philippe Bourgois, describing his own ethnography on crack dealers in East Harlem.²² Unlike Bourgois, and Malinowski, I did not live in the

²¹ For similar observations, see Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (New York: Pearson, 2002), p. 252; Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1984 [1922]), pp. 17–22.

²² Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 13.

community I studied, but I did establish “long-term, organic relationships” with many of the people I write about in this book. Some of these people did not know what to make of me at first. But they opened up after watching me visit their East London neighborhoods repeatedly. They knew that I was a white, American university professor, a bewhiskered, scruffily-clad student of Islamic activism whose research was funded by the US government.²³ My position of privilege, and my willingness to listen, observe, and interact, gave me access to their lives. Some of them hoped – rather wishfully in my view – that I had the ear of American officials and policy makers, to whom I would tell their stories. Others hoped, even more wishfully, that once I understood their beliefs the scales would fall from my eyes and I would embrace their call. In reality, I often disagreed with my respondents, especially during their initial interviews, when they quoted the same verses of scripture and repeated stock grievances against Western foreign policy. But I always avoided criticizing them or their views, even when they sought to provoke me with outrageous comments. I did my best to treat my respondents with dignity and respect. I listened closely to what they were telling me and I asked questions, seeking to engage them on their own terms. Once they saw that I was eager to discuss their ideas and experiences candidly and courteously, they often reciprocated my behavior.

While I learned something from every interaction, my most illuminating conversations were with activists and former activists who I interviewed on multiple occasions.²⁴ When I interviewed the same activist repeatedly, his sermonizing ceased and he became more willing to answer my questions directly, without rhetorical boilerplate or subterfuge. He became more open, in other words, to having a frank and meaningful conversation. Many of these respondents were the network’s leading and veteran activists. Not only did they tend to be the most articulate activists, they were also the most knowledgeable, with the most cultural expertise to share. Some would tell me things about themselves and their activism during our second, third, and fourth conversations that they would never have shared during our first meeting. One leading activist I came to know over the course of several years was stand-offish during our initial encounters. But after meeting with him a few times, he gradually opened up to me, sharing more insights into his activism with each succeeding conversation. During our fourth interview, several months after he

²³ For more on positionality and reflexivity, see Dvora Yanow, “Dear Author, Dear Reader: The Third Hermeneutic in Writing and Reviewing Ethnography,” in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, edited by Edward Schatz (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 275–302.

²⁴ Similarly, when discussing her repeated interviews with El Salvadoran peasants directly affected by the country’s civil war, Elisabeth Wood argues that returning to the same communities several times allowed her to gather high quality data from her respondents. See Elisabeth Jean Wood, “Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones,” *Qualitative Sociology* 29, no. 3 (2006), pp. 375, 378.

had been arrested in the September 2014 round-up of network leaders, I asked him whether he trusted me. “Yes I do,” he responded. “I trust you to the extent that I will sit with you, talk with you, engage with you. There’s nothing more than that.”²⁵

His second point was as important as his first. In clarifying that “there’s nothing more than that,” this senior activist, who liked to refer to himself as a “convicted terrorist” because he had been jailed for crimes related to his activism, was marking the boundaries of his trust, and our relationship. We were friendly, but not friends. Steeped in my identity as an “objective” social scientist, I took comfort in such remarks, rather than being offended by them. I had no desire to fall victim to “ethnographic seduction” by letting my personal feelings towards him and other activists get in the way of my research.²⁶ Wary of engaging in deception, I often reminded respondents that I was there to study their activism rather than “convert” to their cause. They also sought to maintain their distance from me, even when, after multiple interactions, they grew comfortable teasing me about my wispy beard or whether I might be a spy for the CIA. Activists’ acceptance of me was provisional, the sort of approval one grants a curious – and not completely trusted – outsider. “I trust you to the extent that I will... engage with you,” the “convicted terrorist” said, exemplifying this attitude. All teasing and rapport-building aside, he and I both understood that I would always remain a stranger to the Emigrants – and they to me. Sometimes it is precisely a stranger, someone who, in Simmel’s terms, is “in but not of” a cultural scene that can describe that scene with enough insight – and detachment – to create an interpretation that explains rather than sensationalizes such a highly politicized, poorly understood phenomenon as al-Muhajiroun.²⁷

²⁵ Interview with leading activist, Stratford, East London, December 13, 2014.

²⁶ Antonius C. G. M. Robben, “Ethnographic Seduction, Transference, and Resistance in Dialogues about Terror and Violence in Argentina,” *Ethos* 24, no. 1 (1996), pp. 71–106.

²⁷ Ann Mische, *Partisan Publics: Communication and Contention Across Brazilian Youth Activist Networks* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 367; Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated, edited, and introduced by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950); and Yanow, “Dear Author, Dear Reader,” p. 286.