STATE OF THE ART

Researchers of the far right as intersectional subjects: three arenas for emotional labour

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This conceptual article examines the relational dynamic between the research field focusing on the far right and those critical scholars that endeavour to undertake these studies. It is theoretically anchored in the field of political science scholarship that recognises the key role played by gender in understanding both the ideological underpinnings and the workings of various far-right entities and by intersectionality in explaining complex systems of power and inequality. Specifically, this article addresses how the complex subjectivity of scholars of the far right shapes the demands for and experiences of emotional labour along three interconnected arenas: the fieldwork, neoliberal academia and their private lives. The conclusion highlights the need for more attention to the ways in which unequal demands for emotional labour in the academic context perpetuate existing inequalities and that institutions should improve support for scholars whose work demands a high degree of emotional labour.

Keywords emotional labour • far right • intersectional subjectivity • neoliberal academia • private sphere • research field

Key messages
- Research on the far-right continuum benefits from centring researchers' own intersectional subjectivity.
- Critical empathy is a valuable conceptual device in scholars' critical-methodology toolkit.
- The unequal demands for emotional labour in academia perpetuate existing inequalities.
- Institutions must better support scholars whose work demands a high degree of emotional labour.

Introduction

> On a grey January afternoon in 2023, we – the two authors of this article –
> discussed our shared interest in examining the challenges encountered when
> researching far-right and anti-gender mobilisations. We wanted to address
> how this kind of work can impact us personally in ways that, in our opinion,
> have remained under-acknowledged and under-addressed by our funders and
> employers. We also wholeheartedly agreed that should we write something
> on this matter, we nonetheless did not want to share personal experiences
> that would make us feel (even more) vulnerable. Put simply, we agreed that
> the emotional labour of sharing personal experiences publicly to further an
> academic conversation would cross a boundary that we both wished to maintain.

This article represents the outcome of that discussion, engaging in a much-needed
conversation on the emotional dynamics of academic work in a contentious and risky
field of research. In this conceptual contribution, we examine the relational dynamics
between the interdisciplinary field of far-right research and the critical scholars who
undertake these studies. We do so by asking: how does the complex subjectivity of
researchers of the far right shape demands for and experiences of emotional labour? For
this endeavour, we deploy the concept of the 'far-right continuum' (Norocel, 2023)
to account for the complexity of this field of research while providing much-needed
conceptual rigour. We embed the concept solidly into the field of political science
scholarship that recognises the key role played by intersections of gender and white
supremacy in understanding both the ideological underpinnings and the workings of
the various far-right entities (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015; Köttig et al, 2017; Blee,
2020; Geva, 2020a). To this, we add the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991;
Verloo, 2006; Collins, 2009; 2019; Ferree, 2009; Mügge et al, 2018). We argue that it
is essential for us to be able to account for the complex way in which the subjectivity
of researchers of the far right is perceived (by both the entities they choose to study and
their colleagues) in terms of their gender and sexuality, race and/or ethnicity, social class,
and belonging to (visible) minoritised religious communities. With these conceptual
points of departure, we deploy the theoretical lens of emotional labour (Hochschild,
2003; 2012). We widen the remit of analyses that have utilised the concept to examine
the various emotional demands mainly in the context of teaching in neoliberal academia
(Allen, 2017; Gregory and singh, 2018). We explore its role in approaching research
conceptually, especially when it entails engaging with human research populations that
may pose a risk to the researcher (Letherby et al, 2012; Waters et al, 2020; Geelhoed et
al, 2024; Segers et al, 2024). We do this by building further on studies highlighting the
uneven burden of emotional labour that falls upon early-career, working-class women,
as well as racialised and (visible) religious minority scholars (Tunguz, 2016; Lawless,
2018; Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019; Kalm, 2019; Rickett and Morris, 2021;
Chen and Lawless, 2025).

Equipped with this critical conceptual apparatus, which allows us to flesh out the
dynamics of unequal power relations and their emotional underpinnings, we examine
how scholarship discussing the work of researchers of the far-right continuum
evidences the role of emotional labour along three interconnected arenas: first, in the
research field, wherein researchers encounter their research population and undertake
the collection of empirical material; second, within the contemporary neoliberal

academic context, where researchers are expected to perform their scholarly role and make the results of their research visible to wider audiences; and, third, even in the private sphere, where the distinction between the emotional labour performed by researchers in their professional lives and other forms of managing emotions in the private sphere has gradually dissolved. The theoretical lens of emotional labour enables researchers from the political sciences and adjacent disciplines to better understand and address the unequal demands for emotional labour in the academic context.

The article is organised into six further sections. The first details the theoretical scaffolding, wherein we present the concepts of the far-right continuum and intersectionality, positioning researchers of the far right as intersectional subjects. The second section introduces the concept of emotional labour, which is then deployed as a theoretical lens in the following sections to examine the arenas under scrutiny: the research field in the third section, neoliberal academia in the fourth and the private sphere in the fifth. The sixth section provides a concluding discussion, situating the article's findings within the wider conversation in political science and adjacent disciplines about the intersectional subjectivity of researchers, as well as the importance of emotion in studying the far-right continuum.

Theoretical scaffolding: researchers of the far-right continuum as intersectional subjects

Scholars examining critically different 'configurations of anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic, authoritarian, fascist, xenophobic, racist, ethno-nationalist, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-gender, reactionary and hierarchical agendas' (Blee, 2020: 416) have deployed various strategies to provide conceptual consistency for their scholarly endeavours. For the purpose of this article, we opt for the theoretical construct of the 'far-right continuum' (Norocel, 2023), which conceptualises the far right as a continuously changing range of discreetly connected entities whose politics are inherently rooted in traditionalist and retrogressive gender politics (see Spierings and Zaslove, 2015; Norocel, 2016; Köttig et al, 2017; Blee, 2020; Geva, 2020a; 2020b; Norocel et al, 2022). The concept accounts for the shifting boundaries between what is considered 'mainstream' and 'far right' in any given context by highlighting the shared metapolitical ambition of the entities within this continuum, which is to programmatically 'shift attitudes and boundaries of what is generally deemed to be acceptable democratic speech and establish their own cultural and political hegemony debate' (Norocel, 2022: 1). Furthermore, although both the far right and the mobilisation around the imperative to fight 'gender ideology' are gaining political salience, we agree that these are discrete projects, which may contingently converge or compete against one another in different polities (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 13–14).

Several researchers have aptly noted that the entities mobilising along the far-right continuum target communities that do not fall neatly into the fold of what they proclaim to be 'good citizens'. These targeted communities encompass such diverse categories as women, racialised communities, (visible) minoritised religious communities, and the community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other non-binary categories (LGBT+). Consequently, any researcher 'publicly identifiable as falling into one or more of these categories is likely to prove a more attractive and persistent target' (Conway, 2021: 370) of far-right retaliation and harassment (see

Massanari, 2018: 4; Rambukkana, 2019: 319; Gosse et al, 2021: 265; Gelashvili and Gagnon, 2024, 11–13). This shifts the focus from 'how different gender arrangements … impact on the recruitment, mobilisation, and role of men and women in the far-right entities' (Norocel, 2023: 289) onto the way in which researchers of the far right themselves are perceived as gendered subjects along the traditional and reductionist gender dyad differentiating between men (and masculinities) and women (and femininities). A caveat is notable here: given that such binary simplification effectively 'reifies normative gender discourse and cis-heteronormative ideas of gender identity' (Smith and Garrett-Scott, 2021: 28), we instead approach gender as a collection of reiterative and authoritative acts, gestures and enactments, which are '*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (Butler, 2007: 185, emphases in original). Considering the heterogeneity of the communities targeted by the far-right entities, then, we argue that gender alone cannot convey the complex positionality of the researchers, which oftentimes intersects with other categories partaking in 'the structural convergence among intersecting systems of power' (Collins, 2019: 26).

Another important theoretical building block that we add to our study is that of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Verloo, 2006; Collins, 2009; 2019; Ferree, 2009; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Mügge et al, 2018; Labelle, 2020; Siow, 2023). Intersectionality allows us to account for the location of the researchers and their subject of study concomitantly at the junction of several systems of social ordering (Mügge et al, 2018: 30; Labelle, 2020: 416), whereby 'systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organisation' (Collins, 2009: 299). This notwithstanding, intersectionality is not a stationary stapling together of an ever-growing number of systems of social ordering (Choo and Ferree, 2010: 147; Collins, 2019: 235); rather, it is a critical account of the continuous and co-constitutive relationship between gender and other categories, which 'brings forth an imperative to understand the workings of intersectional differences as *performative*' (Norocel et al, 2022: 902, emphasis added). Accordingly, the way that researchers of the far right are perceived – both by the entities they choose to study and by their academic peers – as intersectional subjects, in terms of their gender and sexuality, race and/or ethnicity, social class, and membership in (visible) minoritised religious communities, is contingent upon the socio-historical and political context in which both researchers and the entities they study are embedded. In sum, this theoretical scaffolding allows us to understand better both the focus of far-right studies (namely, the various entities on the far-right continuum and their interactions) and the authors undertaking these studies (namely, the researchers themselves and their intersectional subjectivities).

Emotional labour as a theoretical lens

The theoretical focus of this study is indebted to path-breaking work on emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003; 2012), which, since its first publication in the early 1980s, has made its way beyond the original conceptual remit of sociology. Emotional labour has been defined as work typically located in, albeit not limited to, the service industry, which 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild,

2012: 7). Although we all manage emotions daily as part of our private lives, the concept of emotional labour concerns the way that employers play a role in defining how people should act, invoke and control emotions as part of their professional lives (Hochschild, 2012: 19). Different 'levels' of emotional labour require different types and levels of emotion 'work': whereas 'surface acting' pertains to situations when one is acting out emotions as a 'display rule' without experiencing them internally, 'deep acting' is performed by way of 'directly exhorting feeling' or 'by making indirect use of trained imagination' (Hochschild, 2012: 37–8). It is worth noting, however, that we all resort to both forms of surface and deep acting in our daily interactions, but what is specific about emotional 'labour' is precisely the instrumentalisation of this kind of work in a professional environment, required in more or less explicit ways by managers and institutions (Hochschild, 2012: 19).

Over the past few decades, academia has become engulfed by and has increasingly succumbed to neoliberal ways of organising, which is marked by corporatist reasoning, the atomisation of individual research and privatisation of education, and managerial anti-intellectualism (see Mountz et al, 2015; Allen, 2017; Gregory and singh, 2018; Rosa, 2022). Several researchers have aptly pointed out that universities have increasingly become part of the service industry, consequently elevating the expectations and demands for emotional labour on behalf of those working in academia, particularly with regards to teaching (see Lawless, 2018; Rickett and Morris, 2021). These expectations and demands are nonetheless unevenly distributed among members of staff, with the most significant strain of emotional labour falling upon early-career, working-class women and racialised and (visible) minority religious scholars (Essed, 2013; Tunguz, 2016; Lawless, 2018; Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019; Kalm, 2019; Rickett and Morris, 2021; Chen and Lawless, 2025).

The scholarship addressing these issues in political science and adjacent social sciences has grown in recent years (see Dhanpat, 2016; Darby, 2017; Lawless, 2018; Kalm, 2019; Waters et al, 2020). Some studies have explored the ways in which such demands for emotional labour impact the work and well-being of members of staff in specific fields, for example, in political science (Kalm, 2019), criminology (Waters et al, 2020) and communication studies (Lawless, 2018). Most researchers have concentrated on examining emotional labour in the context of teacher/lecturer–student relations (Darby, 2017) or in the context of administrative duties (Kalm, 2019). Against a background of contemporary neoliberal encroachment on academia, the emotional labour of pastoral care for students is mainly understood as a crucial component of the 'service' of education provided to students–cum–customers (Lawless, 2018). As Susan Gair, Tamar Hager and Omri Herzog (2021: 119) argue, 'the institutional and self-expectations to silence feelings of stress and exhaustion resulting from downgrading of conditions, increased surveillance and lack of recognition demand great amounts of emotional work'. Emotional labour also reifies gendered hierarchies and 'essential and essentialised roles, where key "mothering" duties and "housekeeping" academic roles are allocated primarily to women academics' (Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019: 1). This increasing demand for emotional labour and its unequal distribution needs be viewed in relation to the broader and persistent stereotype of the academic as 'an isolated individual, a brain without a body, someone without family obligations who can devote himself wholeheartedly to science' (Kalm, 2019: 9, our translation from Swedish). This notwithstanding, most of this scholarship pays relatively limited attention to the complex ways whereby different intersecting systems of social ordering may impact

the experiences of and demands for emotional labour among scholars' intersectional subjectivities (for notable exceptions, see Essed, 2013; Chen and Lawless, 2025).

We agree with several critical voices in the field (Lisiak and Krzyżowski, 2018: 34; Waters et al, 2020: 2; Brewis, 2021: 278–80; Geelhoed et al, 2024: 2) who identify an area for further expansion of this incipient literature pertaining to the role of emotional labour in 'research' contexts. By explicitly concentrating on this aspect, we acknowledge that research 'is an intellectual activity that involves a consideration of power, emotion and P/politics' (Letherby, 2014: 45). Researchers themselves are central to this activity by their very personhood and engagement in the field with the research population (Letherby et al, 2012: 3; Lisiak and Krzyżowski, 2018: 44; Geelhoed et al, 2024: 2). In this vein, we aim to expand the body of political science scholarship by calling attention to the experiences of conducting research on the far-right continuum, a field that posits specific emotional challenges. In our endeavour, we build on the critical work of scholars that have evinced the way that emotional labour is not only a burden or an obstacle to overcome but may also be deployed as a useful analytical instrument, part of a critical-methodological toolkit (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017; Waters et al, 2020; Bengtsson Meuller, 2024). Along this line of reasoning, we acknowledge that '[e]motional labour does not always signal a researcher's flaws or failings; it can result from a tension within critical methodology itself' (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017: 101). Furthermore, we agree that experiences of emotional labour can help researchers in 'contextualizing emotions, using emotions to unmask power in the research process, and linking emotions to personal biographies' (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017: 83; cf Labelle, 2020: 416, 420).

With this in mind, in our conceptualisation of emotional labour in researching the far-right continuum we acknowledge that a 'researcher's own personal values and identification will influence their performance of emotional labour, as will the characteristics of their participants, the research topic and the research environment more broadly' (Waters et al, 2020: 2). Consequently, here, we examine the ways in which scholars of the far-right continuum engage in emotional labour in three interconnected arenas: the research field, wherein they encounter the research population and undertake the collection of their empirical material; the present neoliberal academic context, wherein researchers are expected to perform their role as scholars and disseminate their research results; and the private sphere. Given the article's conceptual aims, we undergird our discussion with illustrative quotations from the scholarship addressing these issues. We have adopted a mix of purposeful and snowball sampling techniques (Schutt, 2022), whereby the most recent scholarship (Waters et al, 2020; Conway, 2021; Norocel, 2022; Gelashvili and Gagnon, 2024; Segers et al, 2024; Vaughan, 2024a) and expert reports on the matter (Digan and Baaren, 2021; Pearson et al, 2023) guided us towards earlier research (Simi et al, 2016; Blee, 2018; Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019). Initially, we collected scholarship published in political science and international relations journals in English (Ellinas, 2023; Böckman et al, 2024; Geelhoed et al, 2024), which we supplemented with specialist qualitative-methodology journals (Easterday et al, 1977; McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017; Gosse et al, 2021; Damhuis and de Jonge, 2022; de Coning, 2023; Deodhar, 2022) and chapters in anthologies (Lisiak and Krzyżowski, 2018; Dobratz and Waldner, 2021; Carthy and Schuurman, 2023; Bengtsson Meuller, 2024; Ramalingam, 2024; Tebaldi and Jereza, 2024; Vaughan, 2024b). Later, we included articles published in adjacent social science journals, including in French (Avanza,

2008; Bellè, 2016; Debos, 2023). We aimed to both decentre our own experiences as scholars of the far-right continuum and evince commonalities and differences in approaching these issues across the social sciences.

Emotional labour in the research field

The research field, understood here in both physical terms (as in the political-ethnographic fieldwork and in-person interview settings) and digital or content-based terms (such as digital ethnography or any form of qualitative analysis of online materials), constitutes an environment that demands various types of emotional labour on behalf of the researcher. Such demands for emotional labour are shaped not only by the type of interaction with research participants and/or materials (for example, face-to-face interviews or digital engagement) but also by the kind of entities that the researcher engages with (for example, extreme-right groups or radical-right populist political parties). Although there is much to say about the breadth of emotional demands related to different types of research, we focus specifically on the ways in which scholars of the far-right continuum may face emotionally demanding situations in the context of fieldwork and how these interactions are contingent on their intersectional subjectivity, either when entering the field and establishing initial rapport or when sustaining interactions with research populations (Avanza, 2008; Bellè, 2016; de Coning, 2023). Moreover, we reflect on the ways in which such demands and experiences of emotional labour may be considered to be more than barriers to academic inquiry but, rather, a rich source of data and reflection in their own right (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017; Bengtsson Meuller, 2024).

Research methods that involve direct access to and interaction with far-right entities require the researcher to establish contact with a research population that may have hostile attitudes towards research institutions in general, specific research agendas or the researcher themselves. Although we understand such far-right respondents to be part of a so-called 'unsavoury' population whose political views and aims are in many essential ways diametrically opposed to our own commitment to human rights and democratic principles, we recognise that using such a label is not 'self-explanatory, unambiguous, or unproblematic' (de Coning, 2023: 220; see also Avanza, 2008: 44) and reflects our own intersectional subjectivity in relation to this research population, albeit in a radically different manner than when other researchers examine social movements they engage in activist work for themselves (see Labelle, 2020: 415–16). The mismatch between the views and political aims of the researcher and their far-right respondents may lead to what some researchers call 'under-rapport' or the challenge of 'going nativist' (Damhuis and de Jonge, 2022: 3). The task of 'going native' may thus present a demanding situation in which the researcher needs to mask emotions, views and beliefs that may hinder establishing rapport with far-right respondents (Avanza, 2008; Damhuis and de Jonge, 2022). These challenges are not the exclusive remit of researchers of the far right; in fact, sexism and racism remain commonplace within many social environments, creating significant challenges to researchers who are women, LGBT+, part of racialised communities and intersections thereof (see Easterday et al, 1977; Lisiak and Krzyżowski, 2018; Debos, 2023).

The (potentially) antagonistic nature of the researcher–respondent relationship may be experienced not only by the researcher but also by the members of the far-right entities they study. The latter may, in many cases, hold sceptical views

towards academia in general and may suspect them of working for law enforcement (Simi et al, 2016: 496; Geelhoed et al, 2024: 7; Gelashvili and Gagnon, 2024: 3). In other instances, access and rapport with far-right respondents may suddenly be interrupted in ways that the researcher cannot anticipate (Ellinas, 2023: 669; Geelhoed et al, 2024: 7). Far-right entities may also hold hostile attitudes towards researchers whose intersectional subjectivity constitutes a potential mobilisation target (based on their gender and sexuality, race and/or ethnicity, publicly affirmed political orientation, and so on). This notwithstanding, it is important to question the broadly held assumption that only researchers with an 'insider' position (based on their race and/or ethnicity or other identity markers) would likely gain access to far-right respondents (Ramalingam, 2024; Deodhar, 2022). As a case in point, during her ethnographic fieldwork among the grass-roots activists of Alternative für Deutschland ('Alternative for Germany'), Bhakti Deodhar (2022: 538–9) noted that her 'outsider' position as a minority ethnic woman was 'not static but fluid, intersectional and deeply situational' in ways that at times undermined 'the dominant category of ethnicity as primary social signifier'.

Overall, the practice of establishing rapport often requires scholars to engage in forms of 'surface acting' when interacting with research populations who express various forms of illiberal and exclusionary racist, nativist, sexist and homophobic attitudes. Reflecting on her ethnographic study of Italian far-right activists, Elisa Bellè (2016: 11) recounts a sense of deep discomfort upon realising her reaction to a racist joke was being observed, and she engaged in surface acting to safeguard the process of establishing rapport:

> I keep my head down and, after a very long moment of hesitation, I raise half a smile. When I chose to smile I felt awful. Later on, going back home, I wonder whether it was a sort of test to understand my political views. In any case, I read it in this light and played along with it for fear of spoiling the 'vibe' by being aloof. An ethical, but also emotional issue.

Such forms of surface acting on behalf of the researcher may also reshape power dynamics in ways that could be risky to the researcher. As some researchers caution, power dynamics in the field are fluid, and the situations in which the researcher consciously gives power and voice to far-right respondents can particularly put women and minority researchers at risk (Segers et al, 2024; see also Avanza, 2008; Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019). Noteworthy here is that the emotional burden of encountering violent or threatening language may manifest even when the researchers themselves are not its direct target: 'Threats … were not made to me, but to women like me. So you face violence even if you are not the target of these discussions' as an anonymous researcher's experience is recounted by Tamta Gelashvili and Audrey Gagnon (2024: 9).

Additionally, sustained interactions with these research populations may involve substantial emotional work on behalf of researchers. In particular, Krista McQueeney and Kristen Lavelle (2017: 87) 'associate most challenging emotion work with surface acting', pointing to those circumstances that involved harmful stereotyping, attempts at sexual advances, or persuasion to adhere to research participants' views. On this matter, Kathleen Blee (2018: 19) confessed to the high personal costs:

> I found it impossible to maintain emotional balance in this research. Ultimately, I became exhausted and needed to stop. I found myself dodging occasions to speak about my study, worried that I would be sullied by the political stigma attached to the racist groups with which I was spending time.

One possible way to navigate this situation and to avoid estrangement in the long term is a clear definition of and separation between one's role as a researcher and other aspects of the self. However, such a sharp separation may have long-term consequences, as 'in dividing up sense of self in order to save the "real" self from unwelcome intrusions, we necessarily relinquish a healthy sense of wholeness' (Hochschild, 2012: 183–4). Indeed, some researchers have recounted experiencing deep discomfort when not challenging racist or sexist remarks, masking their responses to such remarks or nodding in order to elicit more information from their far-right informants (Avanza, 2008: 53; Damhuis and de Jonge, 2022: 7). This may be emotionally demanding for researchers whose identities are directly targeted by the racism of far-right research participants (Ramalingam, 2024: 266). To address these tensions, some scholars may choose to emphasise their role as researchers who aim to shed light onto far-right world views rather than confront their respondents (Damhuis and de Jonge 2022: 7–8). Such an approach has also been embraced as an expedient albeit imperfect strategy, especially in situations whereby the boundaries between one's roles as researcher and as private person had unexpectedly been crossed (Dobratz and Waldner, 2021; Carthy and Schuurman, 2023).

Another way to deal with this is by approaching empathy reflectively (de Coning, 2023), which is generally considered an important and valued feature of critical qualitative methodologies. Here, it is worth keeping in mind the crucial distinction between sympathy and empathy, whereby while 'showing sympathy for worldviews you fundamentally disagree with may be impossible, developing empathy for your interviewees allows you to gain insights into their worldviews without subscribing to them, thereby enabling you to get an "inside" view whilst maintaining your "outsider" status' (Damhuis and de Jonge, 2022: 8). However, researchers may in fact experience sympathy for their participants, for instance, as described by Vidhya Ramalingam (2024: 258):

> I found that as a detached ROC [researcher of colour], even I was not immune to the emotional strain of repeatedly hearing of horrific abuses of power, rapes, violent abuse and other attacks my research subjects believed that ethnic minorities perpetuated. It is possible to sympathize with the 'unsympathetic,' and as an anthropologist immersing oneself in the world of one's subject it is one's duty to depoliticise the framework of inquiry and deconstruct the social context which allows us to deem the subject 'unsympathetic'.

In the same vein, we argue that such feelings of sympathy can be fruitfully combined with a careful and reflective approach to empathy (Damhuis and de Jonge, 2022; de Coning, 2023). This notwithstanding, there is a thin line between carefully following ethical guidelines protecting respondents' personal integrity and uncritically adopting an empathetic view towards one's far-right respondents and unintentionally supporting anti-democratic, racist or sexist ideas as a possible consequence (de Coning, 2023: 222;

Segers et al, 2024: 3). Moreover, the relationship between the researcher and the research participants may cut across (partially) shared identities, producing a complex interplay of solidarity and distance, as discussed by Elisa Bellè (2016: 13–14) on her relationship with female far-right activists: 'This aspect was particularly contradictory for me: on the one side, I felt a very empathetic solidarity towards women who, in my perspective, were openly discriminated against; on the other side, it was clear that those women actively took part in that gender order and system of values.'

Adding an intersectional lens to understanding the role of empathy in the research process sheds light on how expectations for empathetic responses are inherently shaped by gender and sexuality, race and/or ethnicity, and class, among other systems of power. Some scholars have called for distinguishing between 'doxic empathy', which merely reinforces inequalities and the neoliberal status quo, and 'critical empathy', which challenges it (Lobb, 2017; de Coning, 2023). In this context, appeals to 'immoral anthropology' (Teitelbaum, 2019) run the risk of embracing doxic empathy and lead to tacit support for and the legitimisation of far-right world views. Furthermore, as Catherine Tebaldi and Rae Jereza (2024: 109) have aptly cautioned, '[e]mpathy can function as a form of methodological whiteness when it aims, solely, at understanding and presenting the world as it might look to far-right adherents without troubling such perspectives'.

Conversely, critical empathy has been articulated by Alexis de Coning (2023: 229) as a means for the researcher to acknowledge the humanity of 'research participants we deem problematic, dangerous, or ideologically antagonistic, while also retaining the distance necessary to critique the complexities of these subjects and communities'. Concomitantly, she warned that such understanding of 'empathy requires the researcher to be aware of their own positionality and to question the relative ease and safety (or lack thereof) with which some of us may traverse these spaces and gain access to these communities' (de Coning, 2023: 230). However, such efforts may be seriously tested in those situations whereby the powerful–powerless dynamic engaging the researcher and their respondent is challenged as the far-right respondent attempts to exert power over the researcher whose intersectional subjectivity is targeted by their exclusionary ideology.

Emotional labour in neoliberal academia

Scholars do not conduct research in isolation. The discipline's broader academic context and specificities play a key role in their socialisation into particular emotional performances, which prescribe what kinds of emotions should and, perhaps more importantly, should not be expressed. In the academic setting, rules and conventions concerning appropriate displays and recognition of emotion shape one's research process, outcomes and professional conduct. Concerning the former, the standard of political science scholarship has for a long time been one of objectivity, neutrality and emotional detachment, and, as such, 'to talk about the body and emotion goes against the grain of an institution that privileges the mind and reason' (Berg and Seeber, 2016: 2). This notwithstanding, there is a growing interest among scholars of political science (and adjacent social sciences) to acknowledge the role of researchers' subjectivity and emotions in shaping the conduct and outcomes of their scientific inquiry.

Researching the far right may put an additional strain on individual scholars, who encounter tensions in academic settings, which assume or demand 'objectivity' and detachment from the research subject (Bengtsson Mueller, 2024). Such demands, however, overlook the ways in which emotional labour is an integral part of the research process and that, 'ironically, we need feeling in order to reflect on the external or "objective" world. Taking feelings into account as clues and then correcting for them may be our best shot at objectivity' (Hochschild, 2012: 31). Some scholars have argued for effectively using experiences of emotional labour in the field as a source of data gathering and analysis and as part and parcel of a critically reflective methodology (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017; de Coning, 2023). This may provide researchers with a better understanding of the 'implicit assumptions we bring to our work, how we can relate to the subject matter or our participants, and how much such emotions influence our choices and interpretations in the research process' (de Coning, 2023: 221). We claim that this is particularly pertinent in the research on the far-right continuum, which is arguably characterised by an implicit standard of the researcher as 'a middle-class, cis white man unthreatened by the subjects he studies' and who is able to remain 'emotionally neutral' towards the white supremacy of the far right (Tebaldi and Jereza, 2024: 106–7). While the role of emotional labour in the research process has been acknowledged and incorporated into humanities scholarship, this is still not self-evident in political science scholarship, consequently making interdisciplinary synergies difficult for researchers of the far right working across such disciplinary divides.

Concerning one's professional conduct, it is worth noting that the display of emotions in academia, like any social environment, is governed by 'feeling rules', which constitute emotional conventions that prescribe which feelings are suitable and which ones are not in this environment (Hochschild, 2012: 57). This notwithstanding, such feeling rules are both shaped by and contribute to reinforcing intersectional axes of inequality. Consequently, in the present neoliberal context, which prioritises 'academic output' over reflection on social justice and collegial solidarity (Essed, 2013; Gair et al, 2021; Rosa, 2022), political scientists from under-represented groups (namely, women, minority racial and ethnic groups, the working class, and/or the LGBT+ community) oftentimes experience that their perspectives and lived experiences contradict dominantly held assumptions in the field (Mügge et al, 2018; Paternotte, 2018). As a case in point, scholars engaging in anti-racist scholarship and activism tend to 'challenge conventional wisdom', which comes with certain risks: 'you can be marginalized as a scholar, face political retaliation, or sometimes even lose the support of friends or family' (Essed, 2013: 1396). By the same measure, women and LGBT+ scholars continue to face persistent gender stereotypes in an academic environment that still privileges men over women and is steeped into heteronormativity (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Mügge et al, 2018; Paternotte, 2018; Prearo, 2024). These hierarchical distinctions also translate into specific expectations for emotional expression in the workplace and professional and social retaliation when these expectations are unmet.

In addition to this, reflecting on one's emotional experiences is not only an important part of the research process but also contributes to fostering a supportive work community, which may help reduce some of the psychological strain on the individual researcher. In this context, several scholars have argued that feminist care

ethics allows for a greater awareness about the emotional dynamics in far-right research (Massanari, 2018; Norocel, 2022; Segers et al, 2024). On this matter, Adrienne Massanari (2018: 5) aptly notes that 'confronting the far right's brand of toxicity for any length of time is simply too much of a burden for an individual to bear – it requires a community of support'. It also helps to focus on the institutional responsibilities towards researchers' (emotional) safety, both in the field and at the workplace, considering that 'much of the support relied on by researchers is informal and unfunded. In our sub-field, it is colleagues, rather than therapists or other relevant professionals, who provide support' (Pearson et al, 2023: 82). Being aware of the scholar's intersectional subjectivity makes it crucial to reflect critically on and take measures against the manner in which establishing support systems, mentoring and counselling structures unintendedly adds another layer of responsibility on political scientists, mainly women and other under-represented groups (minority racial and ethnic groups, the working class, LGBT+, and intersections thereof), already disproportionally burdened with duties of care (Essed, 2013: 1400; Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019: 1; Chen and Lawless, 2025: 136–7). This highlights the crucial role of institutional responsibility in ensuring the safety of researchers studying the far right (Pearson et al, 2023; Vaughan, 2024a), particularly within the broader context of neoliberal academia.

It bears remembering that researchers of the far right navigate emotions and 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 2012) in the broader context of the neoliberal university, wherein they face a thorny issue. They must carefully balance two things: on the one hand, the embodiment of the neoliberal jargon of 'excellence' and 'social impact' as highly visible and easily identifiable individuals, consequently becoming 'branded' researchers, producing highly specialist academic content for consumption on social media platforms and other settings (see Gregory and singh, 2018; Rosa, 2022); on the other, the extreme position of vulnerability they occupy as highly visible and easily identifiable people, thus becoming 'brandished' as potential researcher-targets, exposing them to far-right surveillance and even retaliation and harassment (see Massanari, 2018; Gelashvili and Gagnon, 2024; Vaughan, 2024b). This delicate balancing act also lays bare the inconsistencies in the research institutions' understanding of their responsibility for the well-being of their employees (Mattheis and Kingdon, 2021).

In a growingly competitive work environment, the career progression of political scientists is increasingly predicated on 'research impact', manifest as the dissemination of findings, numerous citations of their 'output' and highly mediatised public interventions (Böckmann et al, 2024). Such visibility may come at a high cost, as indicated by research that shows scholars' heightened risk of harassment after media appearances (Digan and Baaren, 2021; Oksanen et al, 2022), while studies indicate that gendered forms of harassment are found to disproportionally affect women and minority gender scholars (Digan and Baaren, 2021). In this context, recommendations to 'withdraw from the digital public sphere and refrain from public engagement in any form' simply amount to the notion that 'safety requires obscurity' (Vaughan, 2024b: 232). Examined closer, the fixation on high visibility disproportionately endangers political scientists from under-represented groups (women, minority racial and ethnic groups, the working class, the LGBT+ community, and intersections thereof). As a consequence, Antonia Vaughan (2024a: 84) has noted critically that '[w]hile marginalised researchers of risky subjects must make decisions that compromise

their success or their safety, they are ultimately evaluated on the same playing field as more privileged colleagues who do not experience the same dynamic' (see also Mattheis and Kingdon, 2021: 468). Consequently, preparing for, responding to and mitigating the effects of vulnerabilities tied to one's intersectional subjectivity contribute significantly to the higher emotional costs in researching the far right.

Emotional labour (even) in the private sphere

Despite the fact that emotional labour as a conceptual construct was developed to account for the emotional work conducted in the professional environment (Hochschild, 2003; 2012), we argue that this does not imply that it is absent in the private sphere. This is particularly the case in contemporary neoliberal academia, given that the 'boundaries between work/home spheres are often much more porous among professionals like academics' (Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019: 4). A consequence of this is a certain blurring of the distinction between emotional labour in the workplace and other forms of managing emotions in the private sphere. We identify three issues that concern how the emotional labour of scholars of the far right seeps into their private lives. To begin with, it is important to stress that a scholar's identity is rarely narrowly contained to the private sphere; it expands into the public perception of their intersectional subjectivity and into the neoliberal understanding of their 'brand' as researchers (Gregory and singh, 2018; Rosa, 2022). On this matter, we focus on three illustrations. For instance, Martina Avanza (2008: 53), visibly pregnant towards the end of her fieldwork among the Italian xenophobic regionalist movement Lega Nord ('Northern League'), spontaneously opted to obscure crucial details about her personal life, explaining that 'Maurice (the father of my daughter is called Mostapha) was very happy about Elisabeth's (my daughter is called Yasmine) forthcoming arrival.' She then rationalised her lie, which made her feel deeply uncomfortable, as a need to maintain 'the choreographed complicity that characterised my exchanges with the militants, so that to preserve the air of "being oneself" specific to this milieu, which entails [the expectation on behalf of a White Italian-speaking heterosexual woman of] not associating with certain categories of [racialised] people' (Avanza, 2008: 53, our translation from French). In turn, Deodhar (2022: 538) provided a critical reflection on her positionality as 'a non-White, minority ethnic, and female ethnographer [conducting] extensive fieldwork among grassroots activists' of the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland. She argued that a researcher's intersectional subjectivity 'can be actively managed and highlighted to negotiate acceptance in the field' (Deodhar, 2022: 560) by providing the research population with glimpses of their private life. In this case, she chose to emphasise her identity as a wife and mother to add further nuance to how the far-right activists she studied already perceived her intersectional subjectivity. This notwithstanding, she noted that such management (of one's private life and of the emotions it is accompanied by) demands 'a radical self-introspection and exposure to interrogation by the respondents, which transcends the boundaries of the private and professional life of the researcher' (Deodhar, 2022: 560; cf Carthy and Schuurman, 2023: 391–2). In another context, Betty Dobratz was put in a situation wherein the boundary between her private life and her professional position was blurred in an unanticipated and undesired manner in the context of fieldwork among the white power movement in the US:

> While talking with a few young men, she introduced herself by name and explained the research. Dobratz is not a common name and one person asked her a question about her brother. They were thousands of miles from where her brother lived and yet it turned out this person had been a student in one of his high school history classes…. The discussion was pleasant, but she kept wondering what he really thought about her brother and her. She then interviewed him without any problems but felt like this unanticipated event 'hit a little too close to home.' She wanted her role as researcher to be strictly separated from her family but for that brief moment it wasn't. (Dobratz and Waldner, 2021: 220)

Drawing on these illustrations, we argue that besides interrogating how one's intersectional subjectivity and private life become relevant in the field, we should also question the intricate ways in which, in turn, this may demand additional emotional labour, a consequence of the sense of intrusion into one's private life, especially when personal details like marital status and parenthood or other family details are (unwillingly or partially) shared with the research population.

A second issue we want to raise here is that in today's neoliberal academia, political scientists experience growing 'demands to be "always on," to be perceived as continually "productive," and to be ready to "pivot" in order to embrace opportunity' (Gregory and singh, 2018: 181). This expectation, coupled with the quasi-ubiquitousness in our daily lives of social media platforms – driven as they are, among others, by and through emotional messaging, personal choice and personalised experiences – effectively dissolves the boundary between a scholar's private identity and their digital 'branded' selves (see Gregory and singh, 2018; Rosa, 2022; Vaughan, 2024b). The effect is that professional emotional labour and other forms of managing emotions in the private sphere are melded into a hybrid form of exhaustive and exhausting digital emotional labour, which can 'feel like a 24/7 need to be connected, and it can reshape "disconnection" as "FOMO" or the "fear of missing out"' (Gregory and singh, 2018: 178). Such digital emotional labour becomes costly for those individual researchers of the far right who are targeted by networked harassment (Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019; Gosse et al, 2021), as it forces them to disengage from social media platforms and, in doing so, risks both them being cut off from their scholarly community and putting them at risk of underperforming and consequently 'perishing' according to neoliberal metrics of success (Vaughan, 2024a). On this matter, we agree with the critical reflections of Karen Gregory and sava saheli singh (2018: 178) cautioning that 'online negative emotions can "stick" to an individual more readily than they can to an institution, causing distress, anxiety, physical harm, or job loss'.

Last but not least, we argue that there is a significant demand for emotional labour that seeps into one's private life, affecting close family members and friends. These situations generally impact researchers of the far right in the aftermath of their popularising research results and contributing their expertise to important policy work (Massanari, 2018; Gosse et al, 2021; Vaughan, 2024a). As discussed earlier, far-right retaliation and harassment disproportionately affect individual scholars of political science (and adjacent social sciences) from under-represented groups (namely, women, minority racial and ethnic groups, the working class, and/or the LGBT+ community); this notwithstanding, it is not uncommon that among those subjected

to such attacks are also the researchers' close family members and friends (Barlow and Awan, 2016: 6–7; Massanari, 2018: 6; Rambukkana, 2019: 319–20). This is reflected in how manuals of best practices recommend scholars to:

> explain online harassment to your friends and family, and warn them about the possibility of your research making you vulnerable to online attacks. If you live with a roommate or partner, make sure they are aware that your research activities may make them vulnerable as well, particularly if your home address is compromised. (Marwick et al, 2016: 6)

This places researchers of the far right into a problematic situation: on the one hand, the private sphere remains one of the few safe spaces where one can disconnect and find an emotional refuge from their research; on the other hand, the private sphere can easily morph into yet another arena for emotional work, wherein they are forced to share their concerns and fears about their research, not only for their own emotional well-being but also pre-emptively to protect their close family members and friends from far-right retaliation. This also pertains to the potential dilemma to either share the negative emotional impacts of researching hostile communities with a private network of support or to try and not become a source of concern and distress simply by sharing these experiences. Put differently, managing and limiting the emotional impact of 'risky' research on those close to the researcher can become yet another avenue for emotional labour.

Concluding discussion: No researcher is an island[1]

In this conceptual article, we have explored critically the ways in which the intersectional subjectivity of scholars of the far right influences, demands and expands the type of emotional labour across three interconnected arenas. To do so, we have assembled the study's theoretical scaffolding by, first, anchoring the concept of the 'far-right continuum' (Norocel, 2023), which provides conceptual rigour yet accounts for the complexity of the political phenomenon it describes, into the field of political science scholarship that recognises the key role played by gender in understanding both the ideological underpinnings and workings of the various far-right entities (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015; Norocel, 2016; Köttig et al, 2017; Blee, 2020; Geva, 2020a; 2020b; Norocel et al, 2022). To this, we added intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Verloo, 2006; Collins, 2009; 2019; Ferree, 2009; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Mügge et al, 2018; Labelle, 2020; Siow, 2023) in order to shed light onto the relational dynamic between the focus of far-right studies (more clearly, the various entities and their interactions on the far-right continuum) and the scholars undertaking these studies (that is, the researchers themselves and their intersectional subjectivity). To this, we have added a theoretical lens of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003; 2012). Our contribution to the field has been to expand the analytical use of this concept to examine the emotional demands of research on the far-right continuum, a field that posits specific emotional challenges. We consider that such a focus helps researchers to reflect critically on their diverse experiences of emotional labour and, in so doing, to 'unmask power in the research process' and link 'emotions to personal biographies' (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017: 81). This also raises the crucial issue of institutional responsibility to protect and support scholars engaged in research on the far-right

continuum, as well as 'risky' forms of research more broadly. Indeed, given that the institutional informal expectations and explicit demand for work entail oftentimes growing levels of emotional labour and increased personal risk for these researchers, we argue that it is imperative that the conditions for employment stipulate clearly the institutional responsibility on these matters.

The first arena we have focused upon is the research field, where scholars encounter their research populations that occupy various positions on the far-right continuum. We have highlighted the challenges connected to entering the field and establishing initial rapport, as well as those specific to sustaining interactions with these research populations (Avanza, 2008; Bellè, 2016; de Coning, 2023). In the former case, it has to do with the demands of 'surface acting' (Hochschild, 2003; 2012) on behalf of the researcher in settings wherein the power dynamics are in flux and the research population displays various types of illiberal and exclusionary racist, nativist, sexist and homophobic attitudes, which can expose researchers to retaliation and harassment, especially if they are women or are from other under-represented groups, such as racial and (visible) minority religious groups, the working class, the LGBT+ community and intersections thereof (Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019; Gelashvili and Gagnon, 2024; Segers et al, 2024). In the latter, sustained interaction with these research populations gives rise to elevated emotional labour, particularly in those cases wherein researchers experience hateful speech acts, discrimination and stereotyping, sexual harassment, or attempts at conversion to extremist beliefs (Blee, 2018; Damhuis and de Jonge, 2022; Segers et al, 2024). The suggested way forward is for researchers to embrace 'critical empathy' (de Coning, 2023), distinct from 'doxic empathy' (Lobb, 2017) and 'immoral anthropology' (Teitelbaum, 2019), yet striving to identify common ground even when they strongly disagree with the far-right world views of their respondents.

The second arena that we have concentrated our attention upon is the neoliberal academic context (Gair et al, 2021; Rosa, 2022), which shapes both the research process and the dissemination of outcomes, as well as the professional conduct of researchers of the far right. We have anchored our examination into previous critical evaluations of the stark difference and persisting hierarchisation between the taken-for-granted assumptions in the field and the perspectives and lived experiences of the political scientist from under-represented categories (women, minority racial and ethnic groups, the working class, the LGBT+ community, and intersections thereof) (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Mügge et al, 2018; Paternotte, 2018). In this vein, we have argued that these hierarchical distinctions impact researchers of the far right according to their intersectional subjectivity, translating into specific expectations for emotional labour and experiences of professional and social retaliation whenever these expectations are not duly met. Furthermore, we have highlighted the difficult balancing act they must perform. On the one hand, as researchers, they are expected to become their own easily recognisable and high-impact 'brand' and contribute to the overall 'excellence in research' of their employer (Gregory and singh, 2018; Rosa, 2022). On the other hand, as researchers of the far right, they oftentimes experience inconsistencies in how their employer understands their responsibility for their well-being, especially as they become easily identifiable and 'brandished' as potential researcher-targets by their research populations (Massanari, 2018; Böckmann et al, 2024; Vaughan, 2024b).

The third arena that we have focused on is the private sphere, which we approached acknowledging that in contemporary academia, as the professional environment and private domain have become increasingly enmeshed, the distinction between emotional labour in the workplace and other forms of managing emotions in the private sphere has become less sharp. We addressed three aspects here. The first concerns the demand for additional emotional labour that arises when the researcher's intersectional subjectivity and private life are suddenly under scrutiny during fieldwork as personal details are (un)intentionally shared with the research population (Avanza, 2008; Dobratz and Waldner, 2021; Deodhar, 2022; Carthy and Schuurman, 2023). The second has to do with the way quasi–ubiquitous social media platforms practically erase the difference between a researcher's private identity and their digital brand, which paves the way to an exhaustive and exhausting hybrid meld of emotional labour and other forms of managing emotions in the private sphere. The third pertains to the emotional labour that infiltrates into one's private life, affecting close family members and friends. This places researchers of the far right in a delicate position. Although the private sphere is one of the few safe spaces to find emotional refuge from their research, it can easily become an additional arena for emotional labour, as they are forced to both address issues concerning their own safety and design contingencies involving close family members and friends in case of far–right retaliation and harassment.

This notwithstanding, we are aware that this article is somewhat limited in its conceptual articulation. Further research could build on it to explore more widely whether similar demands accompany the work of researchers studying other contentious groups, such as criminal networks or religious–fundamentalist milieus. Given that this article is among the relatively few contributions that centre on the role of emotional labour in research contexts (see Letherby et al, 2012; Lisiak and Krzyżowski, 2018; Waters et al, 2020; Brewis, 2021; Geelhoed et al, 2024), we could not delve into the minute distinctions and particular demands for emotional labour, for example, when undertaking digital research or when researching women, LGBT+ or racialised people who support the far right. By the same measure, we have only tentatively explored the issue of institutional responsibility, which also needs to be examined in connection to the limited ethical (and legal) frameworks in place to protect scholars in contentious and risky fields of research (Conway, 2021; Mattheis and Kingdon, 2021; Gelashvili and Gagnon, 2024; Vaughan, 2024a). We argue that all these represent very promising avenues for further research.

To conclude, in this article, we have argued that no researcher is an island. More clearly, researchers of the far right are not in and perhaps, most importantly, should not strive for a state of objective 'splendid isolation' from their research populations. Rather, they need to approach these research populations with critical empathy. They also need to be well aware of the unequal burden of the emotional labour of their endeavour, both within their professional and their private lives, contingent as it is on both their intersectional subjectivity and the neoliberal understandings of research institutions' responsibility for the well–being of their employees. With this in mind, we hope that the present article and the entire special issue of which it is part will be an impetus for a continued critical and reflexive conversation on these pressing issues within the scholarship of political science and adjacent disciplines.

Note

1 This is a tribute to John Donne's remark that people are connected to one another and that that connection is important for their well-being and survival. The poem in its entirety is available at: https://allpoetry.com/No-man-is-an-island.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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