Conducting qualitative research on terrorism: finding and using primary sources

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SAGE Research Methods Cases Politics & International Relations Submission for Consideration

Case Title

Conducting Qualitative Research on Terrorism: Finding and Using Primary Sources

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Discipline: D6 [*please do not alter*]

Sub-discipline within Politics & International Relations

International Security [SD-POLIR-6]

Academic Level of intended readership

Postgraduate

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Published Articles

Schuurman, B. (2018). *Becoming a European homegrown jihadist: a multilevel analysis of*

involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Schuurman, B., Bakker, E., & Eijkman, Q. (2018). Structural influences on involvement in European homegrown jihadism: a case study. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 30(1), 97-115. doi:10.1080/09546553.2016.1158165

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Schuurman, B., Eijkman, Q., & Bakker, E. (2015). The Hofstadgroup revisited: questioning its status as a 'quintessential' homegrown jihadist network. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(5), 906-925. doi:10.1080/09546553.2013.873719

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Abstract

Terrorism continues to be one of the 21st century's leading security challenges. The 2001 attacks on the United States, the 'war on terrorism' that was launched in their wake, and the rise of deadly terrorist groups such as the so-called 'Islamic State', have ensured that this form of political violence has demanded ongoing attention. Not just from the politicians, policymakers and practitioners tasked with addressing the threat, but also from journalists think tanks and academics looking to understand the issues at stake. Yet for all the attention that terrorism has garnered, those looking to conduct research on this topic face several well-entrenched conceptual, theoretical and methodological hurdles. Based on my own experience, this case study provides guidance on navigating these obstacles and provides pointers for

carrying out qualitative research on terrorism, specifically with regard to acquiring primary sources.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to . . .

1. Demonstrate a basic understanding of the state of terrorism research as a field of study;
2. Critically reflect on the methodological challenges and opportunities for conducting qualitative research on terrorism;
3. Engage in source criticism to accurately assess the potential benefits and downsides of using particular forms or primary and secondary data;
4. List potential avenues for acquiring primary sources on terrorism and reflect on the opportunities and obstacles for pursuing them.

Case Study

Project Overview and Context

This case study draws primarily on my PhD thesis, which investigated the processes through which people can become involved in so-called 'homegrown' jihadism in Europe. It looked specifically at the Dutch 'Hofstadgroup', which was active between 2002 and 2005. One of the Hofstadgroup's participants murdered the controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004, while several others tried to reach jihadist conflict zones in an attempt to become foreign fighters and were involved in developing a variety of terrorist plots aimed at Dutch targets (Schuurman et al., 2014, 2015, 2018a, 2018b).

As perhaps the most high-profile Dutch terrorism case of the 21st century, the Hofstadgroup had already been the focus of work done Dutch journalists and academics before I began my PhD research (Groen & Kranenberg, 2010; De Koning & Meijer, 2011). Moreover, as one of several early examples of homegrown jihadism in Europe, the Hofstadgroup had also attracted considerable attention from the international scholarly community (Vidino, 2007; Silber, 2012). An immediate challenge, therefore, was designing my PhD research in such a way that it would be possible to add new insights to what was already a relatively well-known example of homegrown jihadist terrorism. A starting-point for doing so was reviewing several long-standing issues in the field of terrorism research.

Research Design

Upon reviewing the literature on terrorism research back in the 2012-2013 period, several things stood out for me. First of all, it was clear that the decades-old inability to gain far-reaching consensus on how to define terrorism remained an obstacle. Without broadly-defined consensus on the subject under investigation, building on other scholars' research results was made more difficult, as 'terrorism' could be seen to encompass a quite diverse range of activities. On the other hand, there are few fields of study where core concepts are not subject to ongoing definitional debates. Without a way to effectively 'solve' the definitional debate, the solution for me lay in selecting the academic definition of terrorism that seemed the most nuanced and objective. For me, this turned out to be Alex Schmid's (2011) 'Revised Academic Consensus Definition'.

However, it seemed to me that the long-standing scarcity of primary sources was arguably a more pressing problem than the ongoing definitional discussion. It struck me that ever since terrorism studies got underway in the 1960s and 1970s, leading scholars, such as Schmid and

Jongman (1988), Silke (2001, 2009) and Sageman (2014), had been criticizing their own field for relying predominantly on literature-review based methodologies. Rather than studying terrorism using first-hand sources such as interviews with (former) terrorists, clinical assessments of detained extremists, or information contained in the archives of police or intelligence agencies, the vast majority of scholars seemed to rely almost entirely on what they had read in the newspapers. One of the consequences of this has been that, of the dozens of potential explanations for how and why people can become involved in terrorism, very few can count on substantial empirical support (McAllister & Schmid, 2011).

To be clear, the use of primary sources in terrorism research appears to have improved considerably over the past several years (Schuurman, 2018). But these critical observations about the field held true for the specific case of the Hofstadgroup, where relatively few authors had managed to study the group using the greater detail and reliability that first-hand sources offer. What I took from this debate was that gathering and analyzing primary sources would be critical for my attempt to move forward the debate on how and why involvement in the Hofstadgroup, or indeed European homegrown jihadism more broadly, had occurred. A first step towards achieving this goal was to inventory potential primary sources and to start thinking about how to gain access to them.

Potential Primary Sources on Terrorism and Their Use

From the outset, three categories of primary data on the Hofstadgroup recommended themselves. First, there were what could be termed the 'official' records; namely, the extensive information that the Dutch police had gathered during their various investigations into the group and the results of the Dutch intelligence service AIVD's efforts to chart the threat the group posed. Second, there were the recollections of Hofstadgroup participants

themselves which, through interviews, could provide unique insights into their personal pathways to involvement as well as group dynamics. Thirdly, there were the materials produced by Hofstadgroup participants, such as video's, pamphlets and autobiographies that could offer insights into their motivations and their justifications for violence.

Because the Hofstadgroup was no longer in existence when I started my research, field work was not a viable means for gathering additional primary data. Students, especially PhD candidates, working on contemporary terrorist groups or armed movements may, however, wish to consider this method provided the potential personal risks are very carefully analyzed beforehand and explicitly discussed with supervisors. While it would obviously be highly inadvisable to carry out field work in places like Syria, scholars like Dolnik (2013), Horgan (2004) and Schulze (2004), have pointed out that, under the right circumstances, field work can be viable even for an ostensibly dangerous topic such as terrorism.

It is not just the utility and feasibility of various avenues for collecting primary data that must be carefully considered as part of the research design phase. Students should be keenly aware of the need to engage in source criticism, even (or particularly!) with regard to hard-won primary data. Key questions to ask of sources are by who, for who and for what purpose they were written and in what context (e.g. historical, political, judicial) this took place. Police investigative files, for instance, are produced with an eye to enabling criminal prosecution and are thus not an objective source of data written by neutral observers. Similarly, interviews should generally not be approached as fact-finding tools, especially in the context of such a controversial topic as terrorism, where interviewees, both (former) extremists as well as government employees, may have reasons for being less than completely truthful. It

should also be considered whether interviewees are able to accurately recall events, thoughts and emotions that occurred years ago.

Besides source-criticism, data triangulation can be a powerful tool for overcoming the potential biases and inaccuracies found in individual sources (Horne & Horgan, 2012). Here, the researcher tries to verify information found in one particular source by assessing whether other types of data support or problematize it. Do different interviewees recall an event in a similar fashion? Does information in police files match what journalists have been able to unearth? To what extent do the autobiographical materials written by an extremist years ago match the explanations he or she provides in an interview? Beyond finding and collecting primary data on terrorism, critically assessing its validity is of crucial importance to successfully making it part of a research project.

Making Sense of Primary Data on Terrorism

Another aspect to consider when designing research on terrorism is how to interpret the data you will collect or, if relying on secondary sources, re-purpose. Rather than letting the data speak for itself, I wanted to maximize its potential for explaining how and why involvement in the Hofstadgroup occurred by analyzing it through existing explanations for these processes. By using the dozens of theories on terrorism as 'lenses' trough which to view the available data, I hoped to be able to identify explanatory strands and relevant factors that I might otherwise have missed (see also Della Porta, 1995). Additionally, as the scarcity of primary data meant that existing explanations for involvement in terrorism could not be adequately verified, I felt that the incorporation of multiple theoretical perspectives on involvement in terrorism would strengthen the research I was to carry out.

There is, of course, no single way in which to go about qualitative data analysis. By looking at structural, group and individual-level explanations for involvement in terrorism, I gained quite a broad and multifaceted understanding of what brought people to the Hofstadgroup but arguably lacked a truly in-depth assessment of any one particular explanatory strand. In general, however, the use of theory can empower research by providing analytical frameworks and helping scholars to test existing explanations, or even develop new ones. With the exception of historical studies (of which there are arguably too few!), those looking to conduct qualitative research on terrorism should give due consideration to the theoretical perspective(s) from which they will approach their topic. While terrorism studies has not (yet) developed a particularly extensive or robust body of theory, related disciplines such as criminology, political science and psychology do not face this issue. Indeed, the application of the generally more mature theories established in other disciplines to the study of terrorism may offer promising analytical starting points.

Research Practicalities

By carefully selecting a definition of terrorism, adopting a multilevel and multicausal analytical framework, and aiming to use a variety of primary sources, I hoped to have sufficiently addressed some of the conceptual, theoretical and methodological pitfalls that had affected the study of terrorism. But while describing potential sources of first-hand information on paper is one thing, it still left the practical challenge of actually getting access to them. Since completing my PhD, I have sought similar sources for other research projects as well. Looking back on these experiences, two observations stand out. Most importantly; getting access to primary data on terrorism is certainly feasible. Secondly, the main allies for researchers undertaking such work are time (patience) and partners in stakeholder institutions.

With regard to the police files on the Hofstadgroup in particular, the process was relatively straightforward. An official request for access had to be sent to the relevant office within the Dutch Public Prosecution Service, outlining the project, why the requested files were crucial to its completion and specifying the measures that would be taken to ensure the anonymization of any data taken from those files, as well as those to prevent the accidental loss of the materials. What helped me to get this application in order was to reach out to academic colleagues who had gone through a similar process in the past, and to speak with people within the Dutch counterterrorism community. These latter discussions proved helpful in moving the months-long review process along, as I could demonstrate to the Public Prosecution Service that there was interest in -and support for- my research project among, for instance, the Dutch National Police and the office of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

With no previous experience conducting interviews, finding and convincing people to speak with me was probably the most difficult part of the data-collection process. I found that police officers and even intelligence-service personnel were generally open to having conversations but that having the proper procedures in terms of informed consent in place beforehand was crucial to gaining their cooperation. Through the professional network of my supervisors and my own burgeoning contacts with people involved in the Dutch counterterrorism community, finding and approaching potential interviewees with a government background was usually not that difficult. Finding and interviewing former Hofstadgroup participants, however, was another matter entirely.

One of my main advantages was that the Hofstadgroup had been defunct for years when I was looking for interviewees. This meant that most of the court cases had been completed, most of those who had been sentenced to prison had since been released, and that generally I was not looking for people who were still sought by the authorities. Moreover, as a group about which a great many journalistic pieces had been written, finding the full names of former participants was quite straightforward. In-depth web searches then enabled me to identify some of them with some sense of certainty, and social networking sites like LinkedIn or Facebook made contacting them straightforward.

While most said no or never responded to messages, a small number was willing to meet me. Here, again, I found that patience was especially important. Meetings were often cancelled last-minute and frequently multiple times in a row. Moreover, once one did take place, interviewees could be understandably hesitant; wanting to get to know me a little bit before deciding whether they would actually share their experiences with me. Clear informed-consent guidelines emphasizing measures taken to ensure their privacy and safety were important to this process, as they helped me gain trust and convince interviewees I was not out to use their stories in some sort of ‘scoop’.

Generally, however, I found that once people had agreed to sit down with me, they were keen to share their experiences even if they had voiced hesitation initially. I put this down to the fact that for many of these individuals, their time in the Hofstadgroup had become a defining moment in their lives, often with grave consequences, and one that they still had a need to talk about. Especially with someone who was not interested in condemning their behavior but in trying to understand it using as neutral a perspective as possible. Another, simpler, motive

may be that most people simply like to talk about themselves and their lives. Under the right circumstances, this can be of great benefit to those using interview-based research methods.

Clearly, for students and researchers looking to gain access to similar forms of primary data, a lot will depend on the context in which the project is being carried out. Does legislation provide citizens with the possibility to request access to police files, for instance? Are there still court cases ongoing against the people you wish to interview? Is the terrorist group you are interested in still operating or did it cease operations years ago? Ultimately, factors such as these will have an important impact on the likeliness of success. Nevertheless, judging by my own experiences, as well as those of colleagues undertaking similar work in other European countries, with sufficient time and patience a considerable amount of primary-data on terrorism and terrorists can generally be gathered.

Method in Action

A brief but important point I'd like to make concerns the day-to-day organization of the research. Once I gained access to the Dutch police files on the Hofstadgroup, I was faced with literally thousands of pages of information. Similarly, the hours of interviews also contained a wealth of potentially relevant findings. Looking back, I could have saved considerable time had I used a program like Atlas.ti to mark and keep track of my findings and make them easily searchable. Instead, I relied primarily on hand-written notes and quickly ran into trouble when I remembered that I'd come across a particular bit of information but couldn't quite recall where I'd written that down or what source document it was related to. Although revisiting the source material is probably unavoidable, I spent many more hours retreading notes or leafing through hundreds of pages of documents then was necessary had I thought of organizing my data more carefully beforehand.

Conclusion – Lessons Learned

To conclude this case study, let me offer the main lessons I learned while conducting qualitative research on a European homegrown jihadist group. The two overarching points to convey are (1) that, despite considerable improvement, primary sources are still relatively scarce in research on terrorism and that their greater use remains key to moving the field forward, and (2) that finding and collecting qualitative primary data on terrorism is entirely do-able.

Perhaps the main factor relevant to successfully gaining such materials is sufficient time. Writing, submitting and waiting for a response on access of information requests can take months. Similarly, finding and convincing interviewees to participate in a research project can require concerted effort over a long time-period. Especially for students with limited time for their projects, this can be an important obstacle. For this reason, postgraduate studies, or PhD programs, recommend themselves as more suitable for carrying out such research. Finally, anyone keen to undertake qualitative research on terrorism is strongly recommended to seek the advice of colleagues or supervisors with relevant experience. With proper planning, the lack of primary-data that has long plagued research on terrorism is not so much an obstacle as an opportunity for students and researchers eager to leave their mark on the field.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Name one conceptual issue that has affected research on terrorism and how you would go about addressing it.

2. How has the scarcity of primary-sources based research on terrorism affected the validity of the various theories developed to explain the occurrence of this form of political violence?
3. Name three potential sources of primary data on terrorism and how you could go about accessing them.
4. How would you go about finding and approaching potential interviewees?
5. What is the role of theory in qualitative research on terrorism?

Further Readings

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Web Resources

N/A

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