The social ties that bind: the role of social relations and trust in EU intelligence cooperation

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Chapter 4

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methods

Getting an Insider's Perspective

4.1. Introduction

> *'It would be nice if all of the data which sociologists require could be enumerated because then we could run them through IBM machines and draw charts as the economists do. However, not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.'*[1]

This chapter introduces the research design and methods for this study. Whereas chapter 1 introduced the 'why' and 'whereto' of the study, this chapter will focus on the 'what' and 'how'. It will provide a roadmap for conducting the research, building its scientific argument and answering its research question; 'how social relations and trust influence EU intelligence cooperation'. Chapter 2 showed a research gap in the existing body of knowledge on international intelligence cooperation that is partly due to a neorealist presumption. It advocated filling this gap by approaching cooperation as a process on multiple levels and by introducing a sociological perspective. Chapter 3 provided such a perspective. It argued that social relations can lead to cooperation if there is enough trust present. Subsequently, it unraveled the conditions for trust and spelled them out in underlying entities, processes and structures based on sociological publications on interorganizational relations and trust. In turn, this chapter will conclude the theoretical part of this study and forms the linking pin for the empirical chapters to follow. It further operationalizes the conceptual framework for use in an in-depth case study.

The post-positivist stance and critical realist approach introduced in chapter 1 permeate all aspects of this study, from its research design to the methods employed for data collection and data analysis. They imply two important premises that guide this research. First, it means that the role of theory is limited. This research accepts that theories can hold no absolute truth and that the best a social researcher can aspire is to increase understanding of behavior within specific practices.[2] Nevertheless, based on previous research some theories can be identified that are less fallible than others and their concepts can provide helpful entry points for studying a particular mechanism in a specific context.[3] The conceptual framework on social relations and trust constructed in chapter 3 serves this purpose. It provides a viable lens for the case study of EU intelligence cooperation. Second, it means that - as the opening quote states - not everything that counts can be counted. This research focusses on

1 Cameron, *Informal Sociology*, 13.

2 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 183–84.

3 Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 39; Glaser and Strauss, "Discovery of Substantive Theory," 5.

practices; the interplay between actors and social structures. In doing so, it acknowledges the importance of subjective interpretation for sensemaking and behavioral preferences. The critical appraisal of people's espoused beliefs and perceptions uncovers a portion of reality that otherwise remains unknown or unrecognized.[4] The thick analysis used in chapters 6 to 8 serves this purpose. It provides an insider's perspective on the meaning of social relations and trust in EU intelligence cooperation.

After this introduction, this chapter consists of four sections that will explicate the design and methodology of this research. In section 4.2 the research design will be explicated. This research constitutes of a single case study. It is well equipped for the qualitative aim of interpretive understanding.[5] The subject of this study is the EU intelligence system. It is interesting as it is a deviant case of international intelligence cooperation. Through this case it becomes possible to scrutinize the mechanism of social relations and trust in international intelligence cooperation; the object of this study.[6] Section 4.3 deals with the methods for data collection. This research uses a combination of desk research and interviews to collect data. It relies on the proposed relations from its conceptual framework on social relations and trust to guide it. Whereas the desk research provides mainly contextual information, the interviews deliver information about perceptions and beliefs. The latter are semi-structured. Rather than being an exact blueprint for questioning a respondent, they are an open-ended list of relevant issues that opens the floor to meaningful conversation. Examining the proposed relations from the conceptual framework in the case of the EU will make the conditions for international intelligence cooperation more clearly visible. Section 4.4 covers the methods for data analysis. This research will interpret its data by means of abduction and engage theory and analysis in tandem. After a process of indexing and coding the data, interpretative inquiry seeks to extract themes, regularities and relations from the categories identified. Notwithstanding the structured techniques used to improve credibility, studying patterns in intangible (and often unconscious) belief systems requires conceptual imagination. It sheds light on the actual logic behind it.[7] This type of qualitative research poses specific challenges to its ethics and to scientific rigor. These challenges will be addressed in section 4.5.

4 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 29, 394; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 5–9.

5 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 46.

6 Thomas, 14–18.

7 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 113, 136–39, 142–43.

4.2. Research Design: a Qualitative Case Study

4.2.1. A Qualitative Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative strategy. Rather than measuring objective facts, it emphasizes subjective interpretation of meaning. It seeks to see through the eyes of the people studied, and even more so, through them, probe into the deeper levels of their stratified social reality. Its critical realist approach acknowledges the existence of some objective reality, but because of its embeddedness in historical, cultural and social perspectives, these 'facts' are never observed in isolation and therefore not free of values or labels.[8] They exist in a belief system that forms a generative mechanism for preferred behavior. The unobservable processes of social construction can only be understood by interpreting motives, reasons and meanings, ideas, rules, norms and discourses, and the way these are influenced by the social context.[9] Only by showcasing their dynamic interplay with actual events in a specific field like intelligence, it is possible to attach meaning to them.[10]

Beliefs and perceptions on trust among EU intelligence practitioners will be analyzed using a semantic explanatory program to infer their meaning. An explanatory program is 'a general style of thinking about questions of explanation'.[11] A semantic explanation is one that provides a:

> *'Contextually rich and detailed account of a phenomenon. In such an account, the specific details that are provided and their contextual grounding do most of the explanatory work in that the way they are (convincingly) described and coherently ordered provide an explanation of how things hang together."*[12]

Semantics will tell the story through thick description and interpretation. It will provide a great deal of descriptive detail, as it recognizes the importance of a contextual understanding of cooperative behavior in the intelligence community. Context plays an extensive role in shaping trust perceptions.[13] The reporting style will be a kind of 'montage', crafting the argument on trust in EU intelligence from the ideas voiced by the respondents. As is common in semantic explanatory programs, it will use text and metaphors to present an intelligible picture and make a persuasive case. Staying as close as possible to the perceptions of practitioners and their daily setting will help uncover and explore a portion of intelligence

8 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 2–4; Gill and Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World*, 28.

9 de Werd, "Critical Intelligence: Analysis by Contrasting Narratives: Identifying and Analyzing the Most Relevant Truths," 62.

10 Schatzki, "Practice Theory," 12; Crossley, "The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction," 85; Archer, "Realism in the Social Sciences," 196.

11 Abbott, *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*, 27.

12 Cornelissen, "Preserving Theoretical Divergence in Management Research," 371.

13 Lewicki and Brinsfield, "Trust Research: Measuring Trust Beliefs and Behaviours," 57–59.

practices so far unknown or largely unrecognized. Only in a second instance, this research will seek to translate the rich narratives of the case at hand into more general patterns. And even then, it will make use of semantics and interpretation to reach its aim. Scientific inference is 'not only about applying formal logic; it also involves reasoning, creativity, the ability to abstract, and theoretical language in order to see meanings and structures in the seemingly unambiguous and flat empirical reality'.[14] Using this type of explanation enables this study to explain particulars by absorbing them into more and more general patterns. Moreover, it allows the articulation and modification of conceptual and theoretical models behind these mechanisms.

This research keeps preconceived structure at a minimum and puts practices and practitioners at center stage, but combines this with a second-order interpretation that is more abstract and researcher-oriented.[15] The emphasis on non-linearity and interpretivism leads to a relatively loose and essayist line of reasoning, whereas the conceptual framework provides a systematic guide for accumulating knowledge. This dual approach comes back in the 'Gioia methodology', one of the building blocks of this research's data analysis. It will be discussed in detail in section 4.4. Although reluctant to present absolute truths and generally hesitant in their wording, critical realist studies of social construction such as this one are necessarily deeply conceptual as 'it is difficult to imagine how the world that is perceived can be understood without the help of ideas to clarify and simplify what is observed'.[16] They are a vehicle for examining the conditions under which cooperative behavior comes about, based on the 'prior conceptualization of historical practice'.[17] As Bhaskar puts it:

> *'Typically, then, the construction of an explanation for, that is, the production of the knowledge of the mechanism of [...] some identified phenomenon will involve the building of a model, utilizing such [prior] cognitive materials and operating under the control of something like a logic [...], of a mechanism that if it were to exist and act in the postulated way would account for the phenomenon in question."*[18]

Thus, the conceptual framework presented in chapter 3 provides an articulate guidance for studying the mechanism of social relations and trust in cooperative behavior, based on prior knowledge from interorganizational relations and sociology. Conceptually breaking up trust in underlying conditions and their constituent parts provides the tools to examine this phenomenon in EU intelligence cooperation.[19] Applying this lens to practices

14 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 113.

15 Cornelissen, "Preserving Theoretical Divergence in Management Research," 377; Van Maanen, "Style as Theory," 135–37.

16 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 13; Schatzki, "Practice Theory," 13.

17 Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 5, 8; Archer, "Morphogenesis versus Structuration; on Combining Structure and Action," 113.

18 Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 12.

19 Gill and Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World*, 28.

in a semantic explanatory program will lead to seeing different aspects of international intelligence cooperation or seeing known aspects differently.[20] Subsequently, the particular empirical findings in the case of the EU are projected on the substantive theory the research began with. This line of abductive reasoning enables more general inferences about the mechanism of social relations and trust in international intelligence cooperation, by itself and in conjunction with other mechanisms. In addition, it enables to refine the substantive theory itself.[21]

4.2.2. The Deviant Case of EU Intelligence

The research design of this study follows a simple model, composing of six steps, that aligns with the thesis structure presented in chapter 1.[22] First, an event was identified worth examining further. It was noted that, despite skepticism, international cooperation is an important and growing activity in in the field of intelligence. This paradox seemed surprising. Second, the scientific problem was explicated. It showed that the standard or normal mechanism used to explain this phenomenon cannot sufficiently account for actual events. Then a third step was taken. Using concepts from sociology and interorganizational relations, an additional mechanism was identified that could explain cooperative behavior. The main proposition it produces is that social relations and trust together form a generative mechanism, or general explanation, for cooperative behavior in intelligence. In addition, the conditions for trust were introduced to provide a backbone for further conceptualization. These conditions - ability, integrity and benevolence - are seen to empower the mechanism and bolster a preference for cooperation. In the remaining chapters of this study, there will be three additional steps still. The explanatory power of trust will be analyzed in a specific case, an abstraction is sought to the level of the intelligence field of practices, and these abstractions are used to refine the conceptual framework. The methodology behind the latter two steps is discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.4. Yet, first the specific case needs to be established.

This research will use a single case study to achieve its aim, producing a better understanding of international intelligence cooperation. Contrary to the comparative multiple case studies that are more common in especially quantitative studies, a qualitative case study is often considered 'the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances'.[23] It is not about comparison

20 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 29.

21 Gijselinckx, *Kritisch Realisme En Sociologisch Onderzoek*, 128–33; O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 10.

22 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 131–32, 193–94.

23 Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, xi.

of the cases, but about validating or refining a concept. A single case study provides the opportunity to explore and explain a contemporary social phenomenon like trust in-depth and within its real-world context. It is a common design for examining practices in critical realist research.[24] First, the design is well suited to deal with explanatory questions of 'why' and 'how' operational processes work as they do. Second, a case study requires no control over behavioral events; an impossibility in the open system of intelligence practice. Third, a case study is able to include specific context and subjective interpretations of its participants, and research sequences of interaction and relation between them. Moreover, it offers a situation in which these sequences may, to some extent, be conceptually isolated for further study.[25] Nevertheless, from a critical realist perspective the way the mechanism of trust surfaces - if at all - is highly dependent on the context. Trust will increase actual cooperative behavior between actors, but will only be visible when there are no, or weak, countervailing mechanisms at work or their effect is minimized. To be able to examine trust in international intelligence cooperation a suitable case is needed.

The EU intelligence system will provide a so-called deviant case for studying international intelligence cooperation, also known as an 'exceptional' or 'outlier' case. A deviant case is somewhat anomalous to the traditional context of a phenomenon and displays characteristics that by reference to the general understanding are surprising. The deviance is specifically sought. Its purpose is to probe for new explanations and to disconfirm the deterministic dogmas of traditional ones.[26] The EU intelligence system is chosen as a case for its deviant qualities as a research subject. It is thought to show the existence and workings of the mechanism of social relations and trust more readily than many other cases of international intelligence cooperation. As will be explicated in depth in the following chapters, this arrangement provides a context similar to many other types of cooperation between intelligence services. Yet, it also has marked differences, especially when compared with rather simple pragmatic partnerships between two services.[27] It is a multilateral and multifaceted system. It comprises of 27 countries, that work together in a vast and increasing array of policy domains for the benefit of collective action. Moreover, it is very much an open system. The diversity of topics and the multitude of actors create a complex pattern of interaction of which intelligence is only a part. It puts intelligence right in the middle of an increasingly open and interconnected world. As a consequence, there is a repeated - even continuous - interaction between a large set of intelligence organizations and personnel. At the same time, when compared to NATO, the EU intelligence system is relatively young

24 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 5–12, 175; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 15–16; Rietjens, "Qualitative Data Analysis," 132.

25 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 5, 9–10, 12; Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 148–49; Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 24–25.

26 Seawright and Gerring, "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research," 302–3.

27 Røseth, "How to Classify Intelligence Relations," 47–49, 56–57.

and still developing. The context in which the system operates is very much in motion. At the same time, repeated interaction between individuals is commonplace and adversarial and competitive notions presumably hold lesser meaning. For these qualities, the case of EU intelligence is perfectly suited to serve the aim of this research. It will provide a context in which the mechanism of trust can 'to some extent be isolated and then studied'.[28] The - for intelligence - somewhat deviant system provides a fitting subject for studying the somewhat deviant research object at hand; the mechanism of social relations and trust in international intelligence cooperation. A schematic representation of this design is given in figure 9 below.

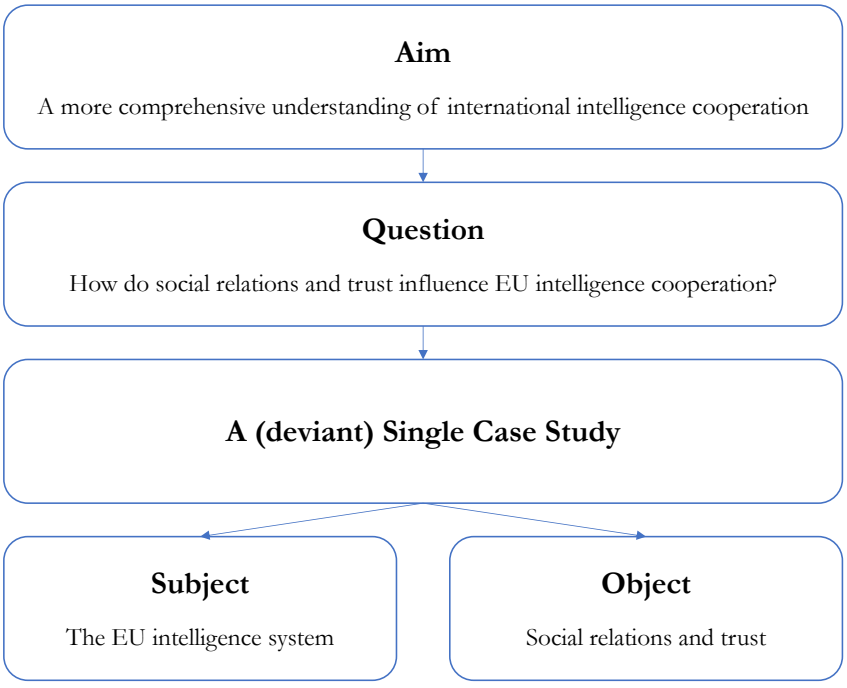

Figure 9; Research design

28 Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 157; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 50; Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 29.

4.3. Data Collection: 'Looking through the Eyes…'

4.3.1. Information Sought

The subject of this case study is the EU intelligence system and its organizations. When looking at this subject, it is tempting to focus on the physical appearance of the latter. Organizations are made of structures, objects and people. For example, a bank building, its desks and its clerks are parts of what we call 'a bank'. Yet, there is more to the system than that. From a sociological perspective, it includes intangible parts as well, like the reputations and principles mentioned in chapter 3. Moreover, the presence of these entities alone is not sufficient for organizations to 'come into being'. It requires a process. It is the relational interaction between parts that creates behavioral dynamics and socially define organizations.[29] For example, a bank acquires meaning through the activities of clerks in relation to customers, and within the monetary system as a whole. When evaluating generative mechanisms, it is important to note that it is the whole of entities in a structure, and the patterns or tendencies they together create, that give them causal power or impact.[30] For the mechanism of social relations and trust these entities, processes and structures were identified in chapter 3 as part of the conditions for trust.

The conceptual framework of trust structures the data collection and analysis in this research. It is undertaken 'with at least some idea of the potential mechanisms active in the empirical domain'.[31] For this reason, it appears to be more structured than other forms of interpretative research. The analytical implications of this structuring will be discussed in section 4.4. For data collection, the conceptual framework provides an outline for answering the research question; how social relations and trust influence EU intelligence cooperation. Based on this framework a set of issues is identified on which information is needed. It forms a protocol to engage with the object of the case.[32] This protocol evolves around five proposed relations. Four of these cover the mechanism of social relations and trust. They include the general relation between trust and cooperative behavior, essentially verifying whether this mechanism is actually at work and what other mechanisms can be identified working at the same time. In addition, the respective conditions for trust form the basis for three more relations. These depict how ability, integrity and benevolence materialize in EU intelligence practice. The fifth relation covers the mechanism of rational calculations and control. Not only will it provide a rival explanation, it will also shed light on the way the mechanisms potentially coincide. Based on these relations it is possible to compile a list of questions

29 Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 150; Barnes, "Practice as Collective Action," 32; Coulter, "Human Practices and the Observability of the 'Macro-Social,'" 44.

30 Coulter, "Human Practices and the Observability of the 'Macro-Social,'" 41.

31 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 15; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 397.

32 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 93–105.

on the subject and object of study that need to be covered in data collection. The research protocol used in this research, including the relations and derived questions, is elaborated in appendix A. At the same time, the protocol will in itself not be sufficient to fully direct the effort and focus. Therefore, a researcher must keep an eye open for 'anything that [he] has good reason to think makes a difference'[33] In a critical realist approach, there are few specific rules for data collection. It holds a broad orientation towards types of information and values flexibility in methods.

For a critical examination of social relations and trust in the setting of the EU intelligence system, this research combines contextual and normative information. Together they give an insight in the practices at work; the interplay between the mechanism and the circumstances at hand.[34] This information can be found in many places, for example in tangible events, objects and symbols. Evidence for the practical workings of social relations and trust can be visible in the number of open doors in a building and the amount of private chat in the corridors. Nevertheless, the focus in this research will be on intangible information. It seeks to look through the eyes of the practitioners working in the field of EU intelligence cooperation. Objects and events contain evidence about practices, but they 'are what they are, by virtue of what they mean to the members [of a community]'.[35] In addition, it is subjective perceptions that form the link between beliefs and preferences. Where the underlying belief system often remains inarticulate and preferences are often blurred by real-world limitations, it is perceptions that can offer a promising window into expectations and interpretations of social relations and trust. They connect the inner world of ideas to the outer world of the observable events 'as seamlessly as possible'.[36]

The methods for data collection employed in this research reflect the need for obtaining contextual and normative information. This research applies multiple ways of obtaining data. Up front it was identified that data collection would preferably include interviews, desk research and (participant) observation. Each of these methods has its own specific virtues for the case study.[37] Desk research and observation are well placed to give contextual information, while interviews in addition provide an inside in expectations and interpretations of participants. In addition, triangulation of data collection methods is preferable as it limits the effect of respondent bias, self-motivation or a deceitful memory.[38] Yet, full triangulation

33 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 14–15.

34 Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 30; Schatzki, "Practice Theory," 15.

35 Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 15.

36 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 4, 6–7; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 33; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 50; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research," 16; Crossley, "The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction," 109.

37 Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 150, 159–61.

38 Van Puyvelde, "The Why, Who, and How of Using Qualitative Interviews to Research Intelligence Practices," 49.

of methods in this study was difficult. Especially, the method of observation proved largely elusive. Up front, it was already assessed the most uncertain method in this research in terms of accessibility and ethics.[39] It is the most sensitive form of data collection (witnessing all from the inside), its availability is heavily depended on the approval of a limited number of individual managers and this approval can only be effectively sought in the course of the data collection. In addition, participating in real-time intelligence events risks obfuscating the divide between confidential and open information with both researcher and respondents. A divide carefully observed in all aspects of this study. As it was, the COVID pandemic superseded this dilemma. In the period of data collection physical contact was brought to a minimum and the attendance of outsiders was - for understandable reasons - not appreciated at all. Getting interviews was difficult enough, as will be explicated below. Fortunately, observation would have been only an 'extra'. It would have delivered mainly contextual information.[40] As it was, this information was obtained through interviews and desk research, as well as numerous informal conversations with intelligence practitioners.

This research uses data from in-depth interviews, combined with a range of documentary sources to examine the how and why of EU intelligence cooperation. Both methods are conducted up to the point of saturation, the moment where no new relevant information was discerned on the case at hand.[41] Desk research is primarily used to compose the context of the EU intelligence system.[42] Many policy documents on EU intelligence and operations are classified and thus not readily accessible as primary sources. Yet, there are many studies on EU intelligence, as well as administrative reports and evaluations on foreign and security policy in the EU that take intelligence into account. These secondary documents are used to explore how the EU has evolved with regard to Defence and Security, the organizational system this produced and the specific role national intelligence has within this system. They form the basis of chapter 5. Its main goal is to describe the size, shape, and general pattern of activities of organizations associated with intelligence in the EU. Although these arrangements will inevitably reveal normative expectations associated with particular roles, or with how the system is supposed or expected to work, this is not the focus of the desk research. For this, the interviews are better suited.

39 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 123–24.

40 Moelker, "Being One of the Guys or the Fly on the Wall?," 109–11; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 436.

41 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 114–15.

42 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 396; Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 32.

4.3.2. Semi-structured Interviews

Contrary to most research on intelligence, interviews form the bulk of the data collection in this research. They are primarily used to discover normative expectations and interpretations. From a critical realist perspective, actors' accounts form the indispensable starting point for social inquiry as they give a way into the deeper layers of social reality.[43] Interviews are well-suited to do this. They provide a:

> *'Route for gaining access not only to the attitudes and emotions of informants but crucially to richly textured accounts of events, experiences, and underlying conditions or processes, which represent different facets of a complex and multi-layered social reality.'*[44]

For these qualities, interviews are a common instrument in social research. For example, interviews are considered the first choice in studying actors' perceptions of relationships in qualitative network analysis.[45] Yet, this is less the case in intelligence studies. Whereas it is suggested that 90 percent of all social science research uses interview data, a review of the journal of Intelligence and National Security shows that in the period 1986 to 2016 only 15 percent of the articles conducted and referred to interviews.[46] Despite the clear value this method of data collection has in obtaining first-hand accounts, there are limitations in its use. Interviewing in intelligence is a laborious endeavor. It is difficult to identify whom to interview, acquiring (formal) approval - let alone cooperation - is challenging, and there are constraints to transparency.

Interviews provide a data set that allows source triangulation. Using multiple sources facilitates a comprehensive understanding by accommodating multiple and possibly conflicting (subjective) perspectives and dispositions.[47] Ultimately, a total of 47 respondents agreed to do an interview for this study. Although this might seem a small sample compared to large-scale sociological studies using data surveys, it is more than sufficient for an in-depth examination of the EU case study (see also the remarks on transferability in subsection 4.5.2). The data set holds more than 65 hours of interviewing, on average one and a half hours of conversation for each occasion. Respondents come from 15 nationalities. Their countries of origin include both larger and smaller EU Member States, vary in date of accession, and are situated in various regions of the Union. More important than the size and diversity of these countries, is the sources of the data. They are all elite interviews conducted with respondents who are subject-matter experts on the practice of multilateral intelligence cooperation in the

43 Moore, "In-Depth Interviewing," 124; Van Puyvelde, "The Why, Who, and How of Using Qualitative Interviews to Research Intelligence Practices," 50.

44 Smith and Elger, "Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects," 119.

45 Hollstein, "Qualitative Approaches," 411.

46 Van Puyvelde, "The Why, Who, and How of Using Qualitative Interviews to Research Intelligence Practices," 48.

47 Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 148–49.

EU. Moreover, they are genuine insiders. Almost without exception they have worked or are working within intelligence structures on a mid-level position either in policy, production or management. When looking at the practices of EU intelligence cooperation from the inside, they are the only ones who can rightfully do so.

Although the aim of this case study does not favor a comparative approach with multiple subcases, the sets of interviewees represent what can be considered 'nested subunits' in the case. Interviews are roughly divided in two between practitioners working in national services and those who work in the EU intelligence organizations themselves. In practice this divide is not as black-and-white as it may seem. Many EU intelligence officers[48] come from national services and many national intelligence officers working on multilateral cooperation have served in either NATO or the EU (or both) at one point in their careers. In this set, respondents come from both the military and civilian intelligence organizations. For example, within the EU bureaucracy itself, interviews have been conducted with intelligence officers from both the EU military staff and the civilian intelligence center. All in all, the perspectives of the various officials interviewed hold the possibility to differ substantially in views held, as their positions involve different practical experiences and their differing roles might entail a different interpretation and articulation of their experiences.[49] A list of all participants in the interviews and interview reports are held by the researcher and are accessible to the supervisors.

The process of obtaining the interview data for this research was a lengthy one. This was not only due to the COVID pandemic that raged during the time. As will be reflected upon in the conclusion (subsection 9.3.1), only polite yet persistent efforts ultimately paid off to induce people to cooperate. First, identifying the potential interviewees and getting approval to do the interviews was hard. Although it was quickly decided to focus on those practitioners most expert in the interaction phase of EU cooperation, this does little to pinpoint them. Unlike in many other professions, in intelligence the identity of personnel is mostly regarded confidential and not shown to outsiders. This study showcases the assertion made by Van Puyvelde that it is one thing to identify potential interviewees and quite another 'getting them to reply to requests for interviews [...], especially if they are contacted out of the blue'.[50] Nevertheless, in the end a combination of direct and indirect formal requests to the home organizations paid off, in some cases without ever knowing the full names of the participants. Once formal approval was given and a trusted entry point facilitated the process, things went smoother and participants even suggested other respondees or reached out to them. Second, doing the interviews and processing them came with restrictions. The caveats

48 In this research, the term 'intelligence officer' refers to both civilian and military personnel working in intelligence organizations.

49 Smith and Elger, "Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects," 120–22.

50 Van Puyvelde, "The Why, Who, and How of Using Qualitative Interviews to Research Intelligence Practices," 52.

needed to being able to do the interviews, of course have an effect on collection and analysis. Many of the interviews were done in person in the secure premises of the respondees. In addition, it was decided up-front to abstain from using a recording device. Regardless of the restricted area in which the interviews were held, using such a device would not have been helpful in putting the participants at ease. Being intelligence professionals, they are used to not disclose confidential or secret information, but most are not very accustomed with doing open interviews. Instead, the findings from interviews and observations were transcribed and commented on directly after the conversation or event, based on the preliminary notes made right away. As the research aims at sensing what might be 'actually' going on, these field notes include the researcher's own interpretations, for example valuing the exact words or terminology used, capturing the mood and describing the context.[51] All reports and the initial notes are stored in a case study database and are available to the supervisors of this study.

This research uses semi-structured interviews. In a critical realist approach, in-depth interviews will resemble guided conversations rather than tightly knit structured queries.[52] Nevertheless, contrary to purely inductive research, that conversation is 'theory-driven'; it involves addressing and discussing the relations of the conceptual framework on the basis of the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of the interviewees. It would be:

> *'Absurd to invest all of the time and money in conducting an interview study without knowing whether it had already been done, what were the main findings, and what remaining gaps [...] need to be addressed. [...] The questions are open ended to be sure, but they generally follow a logical order designed to create conversation, put respondents at ease, build trust, and importantly – focus the discussion on the researcher's questions, not just what the respondent feels like talking about.'*[53]

Although, as a consequence, the conceptual framework is part of the interview, semi-structured interviews explicitly leave room for unanticipated insights and additional topics that arise during the conversation.[54] In this research, respondents were specifically invited to reflect on how they frame their own situation. The initial questions merely opened the floor to the mechanism that the research was to address and were often sent up-front to reassure respondents and trigger their thought process. In practice, they were seldomly done in this order entirely, nor were they covered equally in all interviews. The open-ended questions allowed respondents to speak relatively freely about their interpretations and expectations. One respondent especially valued this method of data collection:

51 Moore, "In-Depth Interviewing," 126–27; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 481–83.

52 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 84, 118–21.

53 Deterding and Waters, "Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews," 714.

54 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 206; Moore, "In-Depth Interviewing," 118, 120–21; Smith and Elger, "Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects," 116–19, 127; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 468.

> *'I appreciate not going through the interview questions [rigidly] and having a proper conversation. That will probably make it harder for you to deduct the data required. Yet, for me it has been a very nice way of going through that part of my career and reflect upon it'.*[55]

Indeed, the relatively free format made data analysis harder. In addition, it required flexibility from the researcher. To respond adequately to data presented and to exploit new insights right away, the researcher needed to prepare his questions thoroughly, leave room for adjustment and have a firm grasp of the issues being studied. Within the limits of anonymity, the respondents were also confronted with their peers' perceptions and beliefs and asked to react. It produced insight in contrasting accounts and enabled to ask more focused and meaningful questions along the way. This way the analysis already started in the collection phase, creating a 'rich dialogue with the evidence'.[56] The initial interview format used is presented in Appendix B.

4.4. Data Analysis: Iterative Reflection

4.4.1. Abductive Reasoning

Empirical data can provide important pieces of evidence on the practices of international intelligence cooperation. Especially when investigating the belief system that is part of these practices, collecting the interpretations, perceptions and experiences of the participants is essential. Yet, collecting data is not enough to gain a meaningful insight. Even when knowledge of reality is considered to be only provisional and partial, as is the case with critical realism, investigating it will require more than just asking participants their views. Analytical work is needed to connect 'what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that shape the world'.[57] Like in a police investigation, important pieces of evidence might remain hidden to the separate witnesses. Moreover, it is how those pieces add up and relate that make up reality. In isolation they will tell only part of the story. No matter how fitting the case and no matter the expertise of the respondents - and they were selected exactly for these reasons -, they are unable to tell the whole story on their own. It is up to the researcher to connect the dots. Each data point found should be 'contextualized in relation to other sources of data, assessed in terms of their comparative adequacy and completeness, and on this basis used to test and develop explanatory theories'.[58] It enables

55 Interview 44

56 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 82–83.

57 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 20–22, 181; Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 5–6, 20–28.

58 Smith and Elger, "Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects," 120.

this research to surpass everyday experiences and events to attain a more general level of knowledge.[59]

In this research, abductive reasoning provides a path between empirical observations and theoretical logic. It combines the two most common ways of scientific inference in qualitative research, deduction and induction.[60] A deductive line of reasoning takes an existing theory and then tests the hypotheses that emerge from that theory. An inductive one works the other way around. It seeks to derive general theory from empirical observations. Abduction hangs in the middle, fitting theory and data together.[61] This logic uses empirical data 'from observations and interviews in tandem with theory identified, to produce the most plausible explanation of the mechanisms that caused the events'.[62] It fits critical realism well. In critical realism, what people see or experience of social reality is considered to be the outcome of a complex interplay between abstract generative mechanisms, subjective beliefs, human actions and context. [63] It is the researcher's task to reconstruct this interplay as a whole and uncover these hidden mechanisms. Abduction acknowledges this and encounters conceptual entities, processes and structures together with context. At the same time, it keeps them analytically separated. This facilitates redescribing the practices in a new and abstracted manner, one that explains the sequence of causation behind observed regularities.[64]

Abduction starts with a preconceived idea of the conceptual framework at work, and then - in the light of observations - begins an iterative process of theory matching that continues all along the research process. The tentative theory guides systematic data collection and data analysis, while its theoretical pluralism makes it more nuanced and capable of adjusting to variances.[65] In this manner, this research starts from the premises of social relations and trust as conceptual frame to better explain international intelligence cooperation. The ideas stemming from this frame are then examined within the practices of EU intelligence. By benchmarking the conditions for trust in the deviant case of the EU, an evaluation is conducted of their explanatory powers. Nevertheless, as the complexity of the case defies

59 Archer, "Realism in the Social Sciences," 198–99; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 36–37, 149.

60 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 75.

61 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 38.

62 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 17; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 111–12, 115.

63 Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 152–55.

64 Marks and O'Mahoney, "Researching Identity: A Critical Realist Approach," 81; Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 162, 164; Archer, "Addressing the Cultural System," 523, 529–30.

65 Kennedy, "The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection"; Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 77, 271; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 36–37, 149; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 197–181; Le Gall and Langley, "An Abductive Approach to Investigating Trust Development in Strategic Alliances," 37–38; O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 19; Timmermans and Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research," 169; Archer, "Realism in the Social Sciences," 198–99.

the linearity of decisive test situations, this does not elicit justified conclusions right away.[66] First, it requires an iterative process that goes up and forth between theory and empirical data to refine the concept of trust in light of intelligence practice. The various subjective interpretations and explanations for trust in EU intelligence will be compared, evaluated and possibly integrated. Second, it is needed to abstract and interrelate concepts further, going beyond more superficial and accidental circumstances. Abstracting the entities and processes found in EU intelligence to 'a higher level of integration, summing up the essential and decisive traits in the phenomena explored' and inferring their logic, sheds light on the more universal conditions for international intelligence cooperation.[67] These conceptual abstractions are used to recompose the conceptual framework, combining the explanatory power of the different mechanisms at work.[68]

Abductive reasoning can offer new and often unanticipated ways of seeing things; 'what was hitherto unobserved becomes the basis of new understanding'.[69] Its purpose is 'not to make truth statements about reality, but to elicit fresh understandings about patterned relationships.[70] Abduction not only uses formal logic, but more informal argumentation as well, inferring from practices in what world a phenomenon, like cooperative behavior, would thrive. It requires intuition, imagination, and creativity in order to see meanings and structures in the seemingly unambiguous and flat empirical reality'.[71] This research proceeds on the basis of interpretative inquiry, putting emphasis on the way ideas emerge from immersion into the situation. To properly understand the specific meaning of trust from the case of EU intelligence, it is essential to let the people involved speak themselves.[72] It serves:

> *'The analytical purpose of working through the combination of forces that provide a more adequate account of why this case does not do what we might expect, allowing abductive logic to be brought fully to bear'.*[73]

It involves a form of theorizing that carves out practices and arranges these along a storyline with a clear set of correlations between them.[74] However, there are few methodological rules

66 Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 10.

67 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 37, 99–101, 117–19.

68 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 394.

69 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 19; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 115.

70 Suddaby, "From the Editors," 636.

71 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 113; Timmermans and Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research," 170.

72 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 232–34, 264–264.

73 Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 25; Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 157.

74 Cornelissen, "Preserving Theoretical Divergence in Management Research," 378–79.

for doing so.[75] For example, the work of Bourdieu on the logic of practice, offers 'relatively little in the way of an analytical toolbox for opening up and exploring [the] subjective side of the social world'.[76] In addition, critical realists 'may be fairly described as having a 'beg, borrow and steal' approach to research techniques'. Much depends on the researcher's own style of rigorous empirical thinking, along with the sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations. Nevertheless, there are some recurrent methods for data analysis.[77] This study borrows part of the systematic procedures applied in grounded theory.[78] It uses structured coding and conceptualizing to knowingly move away from only interpreting a specific case and produce more durable constructs.

4.4.2. Flexible Coding

Interpreting the voiced perceptions and beliefs from practitioners validates and refines the concept of trust in international intelligence cooperation. Yet, the interview reports coming from the open-ended semi-structured interviews produce a seemingly amorph body of data. As in all qualitative research, the 'trick is to find points of congruence and similarity' to guide the analysis.[79] Separating the data in identifiable parts enables a close examination of the relations between entities, processes and structures, 'excluding those which are believed to have no significant effect, in order to focus on those which do, and identify [differences between them]'.[80] This is usually done by some sort of constant comparison or grounded theory that helps elicit themes that capture the essence of the data. They become the building blocks of the report.

Identifying and interpreting important themes generally involves three subsequent phases of coding.[81] Corbin and Strauss use a methodology of 'open', 'axial' and 'selective' coding for progressing from tentative to more definite categories that make up the analytical narrative.[82] They approach the data in an inductive way; one that is 'grassroot-up'. Others like Gioia et al. similarly aggregate from 1st order (informant-centric) concepts, to 2nd order (researcher-centric) themes and aggregated dimensions. After step one they transition from an inductive to a more abductive form of research by engaging data and existing theory in

75 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 96, 101.

76 Crossley, "The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction," 98; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 2019.

77 Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 21–23; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 165.

78 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 148–49; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 168–70.

79 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 161, 224–30.

80 Herepath, "In the Loop," 872, 874; Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, 175–77.

81 Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis, "Grounded Theory Research," 2–5; Biaggi and Wa-Mbaleka, "Grounded Theory," 17–20.

82 Glaser and Strauss, "Discovery of Substantive Theory."

tandem. Yet, up to that moment they 'make a point of not knowing the literature in great detail'.[83] Miles and Huberman take a fully abductive approach. They use a 'provisional start list of codes [that] comes from the conceptual framework, [the] list of research questions, hypotheses, problem area, and or key variables that the researcher brings into the study'.[84] This research takes a similar abductive approach to coding.

The analysis in this research is based on flexible coding; a way to systematically index and categorize the data, while maintaining flexibility in analysis. It offers a three-step process to practically go about analyzing interview data.[85] The first step reduced the data obtained to more eligible pieces of information. All the interview reports were indexed, anchoring their content to the research protocol that is based on the conceptual framework. It earmarked the text into chunks that followed the five relations mentioned earlier, including rivalling explanations. In addition, in this phase already a division was made in levels of analysis. These index codes played an important role in already identifying some of the main themes that were focused upon later. The inverse of line-by-line coding, they:

> *'Represent large chunks of text, enabling data reduction and retrieval as the analyst proceeds through constructing and documenting their argument. Setting the data up this way allows subsequent rounds of reading to be more focused and analytic coding to be more reliable.'*[86]

Because the interviews were semi-structured and a natural conversation was pursued, the index codes were spread all over the interview reports. Labelling them enabled the researcher to systematically analyze them from there. The Computer Assisted Data Analysis Software NVIVO supported this and subsequent steps. It not only helped perform systematic analysis, but also entails the records of interview reports and data structures. As such it keeps an 'audit trail' that supports the credibility of this research.[87]

The second step involved analytical coding. Within the broad chunks identified in step one, all transcribed data from interviews and observations was examined sentence by sentence for frequently used words and phrases, asking what kind of factor they indicated (entity, process or structure). These were then grouped into categories; groups of codes that have some sort of commonality. As categories got generated, new data points were labelled into one of the existing categories or new categories were constituted. For example, phrases containing information on 'image' and 'standing' were eventually combined under the tag 'reputation'. Iterating between theory and data, preliminary categories and subcategories were then

83 Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research," 17–21.

84 Miles and Huberman A. Michael, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 58.

85 Deterding and Waters, "Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews," 710.

86 Deterding and Waters, 726.

87 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 86; Crossley, "The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction," 94.

benchmarked with known concepts. Using multiple theories generated shades of grey, better suited for 'critical examination of the [complex] interconnections and distinctions between systemic forces and individual judgement and decision making'.[88] Data structures were altered many times until an order emerged that was able to capture the narrative of the respondents. During this process, theoretical memos kept track of categories, hypotheses, and emerging questions; providing a solid base for reporting.[89] The number of evaluative side notes and schematic visualizations were numerous.

In the third step, interpretive inquiry provided the backbone for the narrative. However appealing for engaging the research results and bolstering the quality of a study, ultimately indexing and coding the data are only a means 'to unpack the configurational, normative, and broader contextual conditions to which they relate'. Subsequently, the important themes must be teased out, all being 'neither manifest nor readily observable'.[90] This was a flexible process. It sought to discern patterns across categories and concepts, aiming to integrate them in a storyline. Quotes were noted on themes where respondents were particularly curt, pronounced or emotional. 'Playing' with the data obtained supported new insights. It involved 'putting information into different arrays', 'making data matrices of contrasting categories' and again 'varying the sequence in which the information is ordered'.[91] Every (sub)category was connected to other categories to discover significant relations and data matrices were used to evaluate these relations. For example, the new category of 'socialization' was combined with the preliminary category of 'categorization' to explain the differences in perceived coherence between respondents. A more detailed example of a data matrix is presented in Appendix C. It shows how, within the broad chunk of 'ability' at the macro-level, concepts of social network analysis are used to cluster codes into categories and explain the data obtained from respondents on familiarization. The result of this particular matrix is section 6.2 of this study. It was only during this third step of interpretive inquiry that attributes of the respondents were introduced to examine patterns of qualitative difference. It kept the final argument as close to the text as possible.[92] For example, again with regard to socialization and homogenization, the background of the respondents (military or civilian) was introduced to explain differences within themes. Flexible analysis again continued up to saturation; the point where further coding or enrichment of categories no longer seemed to offer new knowledge.[93]

88 Bean, "Organizational Culture and US Intelligence Affairs," 492; Gill and Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World*, 31; Svendsen, "Contemporary Intelligence Innovation in Practice," 108; Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 159.

89 Biaggi and Wa-Mbaleka, "Grounded Theory," 7–8; Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*, 123.

90 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 143–44, 152–55, 159–60; Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 79; O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 10.

91 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 140–41.

92 Deterding and Waters, "Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews," 729.

93 Rietjens, "Qualitative Data Analysis," 134–35; Moore, "In-Depth Interviewing," 122; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 581–87; Biaggi and Wa-Mbaleka, "Grounded Theory," 17–19; Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis, "Grounded Theory Research," 4–6.

Interpretive inquiry enhances understanding by construing a familiar practice in a new way, making it 'difficult to revert to the old way of seeing'.[94] It rests for a large part on the scope and sophistication of the practical and theoretical background a researcher brings to the table.[95] Nevertheless, as there can be several 'believable' accounts of any aspect of social reality, an important test of credibility lies on the outside. This research tested its preliminary findings in two ways. First, among practitioners. The degree of recognition and acceptance of new insights there, was an indication of the quality of the interpretation.[96] It addressed the connection made between the inner world of ideas and the outer world of the observable events. It was discussed in the conversation-like interviews. Ideally, this conversation delivered a mutual element of discovery, bringing to light previously unseen aspects of the behavioral setting for researcher as well respondent.[97] This proved to be the case. An excellent example was one of the respondents in this study, who at the end of his interview remarked that he had:

> *'Enjoyed the interview. It had me look at well-known subject-matter in an entirely different way. I had never before considered it in this light. Highly interesting.'*[98]

In addition, the results of the research were held against five focus groups of practitioners not previously interviewed. For example, a seminar organized by the Intelligence College Europe on the topic of 'International Intelligence Cooperation' in June 2022 provided a platform to present the preliminary results to a broad audience of intelligence officers from 21 European countries. These events were generally held under Chatham House rules[99], but they provided positive feedback on the revised (and thus abstracted) conceptual frame. Nevertheless, the most important test of credibility lies in the scientific community itself. The feasibility of concepts in this research was tested in three conference presentations and published in the two leading intelligence journals. In addition, master students were asked to reflect on it during multiple lectures on international intelligence cooperation. More importantly, the narrative in the final report not only describes the outcome of the research, but tells the story behind it as well.[100] Being explicit in terms of perspectives, approaches and concepts used, the research results can be compared and discussed. It allows the debate to accumulate. Studying a complex phenomenon like international intelligence cooperation in

94 Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 30.

95 Timmermans and Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research," 173.

96 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 24–25; Armstrong, "Naturalistic Inquiry," 883; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 43–44.

97 Smith and Elger, "Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects," 117.

98 Interview 16

99 When a meeting is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

100 Marks and O'Mahoney, "Researching Identity: A Critical Realist Approach," 69–71, 75; Moore, "In-Depth Interviewing," 125; Armstrong, "Naturalistic Inquiry," 882; Birks et al., "A Thousand Words Paint a Picture: The Use of Storyline in Grounded Theory Research," 406–7.

such a structured manner will support what can increasingly be seen as a 'multidisciplinary dialog'.[101]

4.5. Quality Indicators

4.5.1. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations hold a prominent place in this research. The study of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-world context entails a vulnerability for the organizations and people involved. It critically engages the meaning and significance they attach to entities in their direct surroundings. Opening up can have direct consequences for the respondents involved, it can impair their personal integrity or jeopardize their effectiveness. This bestows a special responsibility on the researcher.[102] In intelligence this responsibility is exacerbated by the fact that it is about preserving national security. Intelligence is a secretive business, and cooperation probably among the most sensitive activities within it. For example, articulating perceptions about partners could seriously jeopardize the social relations and trust that are the very subject of this study. It could be detrimental to cooperation. In this research, as desk research was mainly conducted on secondary sources and used for obtaining contextual information, it was especially the interviews and respondents that required careful consideration of ethical concerns. The open interviews sought normative information on beliefs and perceptions. In addition, they were conducted with respondents that in some cases were not very used to doing them.

This research uses informed consent and confidentiality to safeguard the positions of the participants and their relations.[103] Informed consent was ensured from all respondents in the study. Interviews were done on a voluntary basis and special care was taken to alert participants to the open nature of the study both in the initial request and at the start of the interview itself. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the process. It was agreed that the interview data could be used indiscriminately, but that the respondents had the right to consult their interview report or subsequent quotes if they wished to. In addition, it is ensured that they remain anonymous. Empirical evidence in this thesis cannot be related to persons, countries of origin or national intelligence services. When quoting specific respondents, the study only refers to their function and place in the system like 'an EU intelligence officer working in EUMS INT' or 'a national intelligence officer'. No classified data was incorporated in the study. To avoid sensitive information from reaching the thesis and to guard anonymity, quotes were occasionally 'paraphrased'. For example, instead of noting

101 Marrin, 'Evaluating Intelligence Theories', 486.

102 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 38.

103 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 88; Moelker, "Being One of the Guys or the Fly on the Wall?," 113.

the nationality of the interviewee or his subject, a marking like [Country X] was inserted. In addition, the final drafts of chapters 5 to 8 were presented to two senior intelligence officers for a member check on sensitivities. They were not allowed to alter the analysis or text, but able to alert the researcher on remaining issues of confidentiality. They agreed that no such issues existed. Based on their recommendations, one quote was altered to further safeguard the identity of the respondent. Of course, the confidentiality and anonymity put extra strain on the way quality in this study was ensured.

Qualitative research designs, especially when applied to single cases, are subject to a number of common critiques. Among these are concerns abouts their subjectivity, the fact that they are difficult to replicate, problems of generalization and an apparent lack of transparency. These are 'perennial concerns among qualitative researchers'.[104] They stem from emphasizing intangible meaning, doing research in open systems, highlighting context and employing reflexivity. These concerns apply to this research as well. Although choices of design and methods are well thought over and serve the purpose of this study, it is important to also consider the negative implications they might have and possibly limit their effect. In many studies, these quality indicators are referred to as reliability, replication and validity. This research will use similar but different terms to discuss research quality. It approaches research quality in the way done by Lincoln and Guba.[105] Their approach of 'naturalistic inquiry' differs from critical realism and the study of practices in various ways, but offers a fitting perspective on research quality indicators. Natural inquiry seeks to 'understand the social world in which the researcher observes, describes, and interprets the experiences and actions of specific people and groups in societal and cultural context'. It involves the study of a single case, usually aimed at a self-identified group or community. In terms of quality indicators, it uses, amongst others, transferability, dependability and confirmability, and credibility.[106]

4.5.2. Scientific Rigor

A first indicator for scientific quality is transferability. Transferability, which parallels external validity, addresses to what extent the findings are applicable to other contexts. A common concern on qualitative research, and in particular on single deviant case studies like this one, is their apparent inability to generalize their findings.[107] As section 4.2 stated, single cases provide a solid base for the in-depth examination of a specific social phenomenon in

104 Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research," 15; Rietjens, "Qualitative Data Analysis," 130–31, 139–40; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 398–99.

105 Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*; Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle, "Validity in Qualitative Research," 528–34.

106 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 43–44; Armstrong, "Naturalistic Inquiry," 880–83.

107 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 73–74.

a particular context. In addition, deviant cases are selected because their characteristics are thought to showcase the workings of this phenomenon more readily. Yet, by definition the empirical generalization of a single deviant case is indeed problematic since it is - by design - small and atypical. In the case of the EU intelligence system, it can - as one respondent remarked - lead to the idea that the 'EU does not qualify as intelligence proper, and therefore does not represent the dynamics of other arrangements'.[108] Yet, this misses the point. First, the point of a critical realist case study is 'is *not* to find a portion that shows the quality of the [empirical] whole'.[109] The EU intelligence system is not intended to be a perfect sample of the entire population; it is a deliberate selection aimed at providing insight in a specific object – in this case social relations and trust in international intelligence cooperation. When this object is identified in its full in this specifically selected case of intelligence cooperation, 'there is every reason to suppose that the same mechanism is operative in many places' albeit perhaps not with same manifestations or with the same outcome. Moreover, identifying it would disconfirm the deterministic proposition of rational calculations and control as being too narrow or one-sided.[110] Second, as noted in chapter 1, critical realism is skeptical about finding 'real' or universal laws. The generalizations sought in this study are about inferring the actual from the empirical. These generalizations about the object of study are more enduring - hold a higher transferability - than the subject of study. They do not focus on the mere empirical appearances of a mechanism, but rather on questions about 'why, to what extent and in which circumstances'.[111] The specificity of the case generates a detailed insight that helps validate and refine the conceptual framework behind the mechanism. It forms the basis of the abductive reasoning that was explicated in subsection 4.4.1. Ultimately, including new variables will de facto create a new benchmark model, making the deviant case now more typical.[112]

Next to transferability, dependability and conformability are important quality indicators as well. Dependability, which parallels reliability, asks whether the operations of a study can be repeated, and with the same results. Conformability questions if the researcher has allowed his or her values to intrude to a high degree. Both concerns are closely linked to the topic of positionality. This research assumes, as critical realists usually do, that complete detachment from the research subject is impossible.[113] Lacking the possibility of a laboratory setting and the use of experiments, understanding a phenomenon like intelligence cooperation is

108 National intelligence officer, conversation with author, July 2022.

109 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 67.

110 Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 24.

111 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 5, 18–19; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 99, 160, 182. 187-189; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 20; Moore, "In-Depth Interviewing," 126; Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 149–50, 167; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 384.

112 Seawright and Gerring, "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research," 302–3.

113 Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 27.

always carried out in open systems where 'change is constant and, crucially, may take place in specific response to the actions of researchers'.[114] Even more so, this research follows the common notion that 'a committed position is appropriate for realists'.[115] Although its aim is not to change or influence the research subject, 'the ability to make value judgments is [...] not beyond [the researcher's] rightful scope'.[116] In addition, prior knowledge is extremely helpful when doing flexible, open ended data collection in a particular field like intelligence and when interpreting meaning.[117]

Given the role of positionality and subjectivity in critical realist case studies, dependability and confirmability are challenging. It is unlikely that another researcher will (be able to) replicate the research in the same way, even with the same data set, and there is always the risk of personal bias. Although in this study subjectivity is considered unavoidable, and to some degree even necessary to evaluate systems of beliefs and meaning, it must be apparent that personal values and dispositions, or theoretical inclinations, have not blatantly swayed the conduct of the research and its findings. A first way of doing this is to be transparent about the positionality of the researcher and the potential effect of biases. This study is conducted by a researcher with a background in the security domain, part of the Netherlands Defence Academy and a former army officer. A second way is to be transparent about scientific rigor. Although in a PhD-project supervisors have already audited all steps of the research trail, it will also allow readers to validate the proceedings and assess the degree to which theoretical inferences can be justified.[118]

Credibility, which parallels with construct and internal validity, involves assessing how believable the findings of a study are. It asks whether correct operational measures were identified for the concepts being studied and how relationships were determined. Credibility is a point of concern for any critical (case)study, as there are no fixed criteria from which it is possible to assess, in a definite way, the credibility of the interpretations and inferences so inherently linked to this type of research.[119] Gioia et al. are among those that were confronted with suspicion when trying to get a highly informative - but interpretive - ethnographic article into publication. They were challenged by reviewers:

114 Gill, "Toward a Theory of Intelligence. Workshop Report," 6; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 32, 35; Vincent and Wapshott, "Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study," 2014, 150.

115 Ackroyd and Karlsson, "Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs," 2014, 27; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 36.

116 O'Mahoney and Vincent, "Critical Realism as an Empirical Project," 12; Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 196–97; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 82.

117 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 86, 199–200; Armstrong, "Naturalistic Inquiry," 882.

118 Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, 73; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 18, 20, 43–44, 46; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 383–85.

119 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 104.

'Great story! Good writing! Incisive thinking! But how do we know you haven't just made up an interesting interpretation' [120]

This research follows their lead when addressing these concerns. It uses a systematic approach to data collection and data analysis that enables to trace the line of reasoning and logic behind them.[121] One that exceeds most interpretative and reflexivist research. In data collection plausible (rival) explanations were included in a structured research protocol that formed the basis for subsequent interviews.[122] Interviews that were open-ended anyway, leaving sufficient room for alternative views and interpretations by the respondents. In data analysis, conclusions were not to be rushed, but based on a variety of sources, concepts and methods.[123] Coding schemes and data matrices were used to systematically process all relevant information. In addition, analysis encompassed triangulation to strengthen the argument. Although it proved difficult to apply method triangulation, focus groups were sought to complement the interviews that form the centerpiece of this study. In addition, multiple concepts from other disciplines are used to inform the iterative cycle of analysis and respondents from different national and organizational backgrounds are included. In reporting, the semantic explanation introduced in chapter 1 provides a chain of evidence that can easily be traced. Taken together these measures ensure scientific rigor and transparency.

120 Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research," 18.

121 Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 44–45.

122 Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 122, 125–26; Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications; Design and Methods*, 168–74.

123 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 384, 386.