



## A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists

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RESEARCH NOTE



## A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists

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### ABSTRACT

The quality of studies drawing primary data from terrorists and violent extremist respondents varies substantially, with this body of literature exhibiting a variety of repeating methodological issues. For instance, researchers often uncritically accept interviewee responses at face value, overlook key theoretical insights, downplay or neglect potentially important explanatory variables, fail to offer sufficient information about their sampling methods, and deliver findings with inferences beyond what their sample allows. Indeed, certain studies demonstrate a number of these flaws, including the United Nations Development Programme's recently published *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report. Within this context, the dual purposes of this article are (a) to discuss ways to overcome these specific methodological problems, and (b) to provide broader guidance for face-to-face research with such respondents.

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It is often observed that there are relatively few studies within the “terrorism studies” literature that draw primary data from respondents directly involved in creating violence. For instance, in 2007 Andrew Silke asserted with characteristic candor that “most of what is written about terrorism is written by people who have never met a terrorist and who never actually spent time on the ground in the areas most affected by these conflicts.”<sup>1</sup> Although the proportion of articles drawing from terrorists and violent extremists remains remarkably low, the past decade has witnessed a substantial increase in the absolute number.<sup>2</sup> While this development is certainly welcomed, the quality of these studies varies substantially, and this body of literature exhibits a variety of repeating methodological issues. For instance, researchers often uncritically accept interviewee responses at face value, overlook key theoretical insights, downplay or neglect potentially important explanatory variables, fail to offer sufficient information about their sampling methods, and deliver findings with inferences beyond what their sample allows. Indeed, certain studies demonstrate a number of these flaws, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s recently published *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report.<sup>3</sup>

Within this context, the dual purposes of this article are (a) to discuss ways to overcome these specific recurrent methodological problems and (b) to provide broader guidance regarding face-to-face research with such respondents. It covers detail-oriented case study research, quantitative surveys, and intermediate ‘medium-N’ investigations, drawing from the author's experiences of conducting such studies for

programming and policy audiences. The four core sections focus sequentially on the development of key research questions, sampling methods, instrument design, and the presentation of findings. The topic of analysis is *not* considered, both because the array of techniques is excessively broad for an article of this size,<sup>4</sup> and more importantly as there is essentially nothing unique about analytical methods in relation to data from terrorists and violent extremists (the issues of analytical interpretation and reliability of responses are considered in the *Designing an Instrument* section). Nor is the focus on research ethics, or practical matters such as local assistance, translations, logistics and security considerations, as these themes are discussed in detail elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

## Developing Key Research Questions

The process of selecting key research questions tends to be creative and idiosyncratic, with few formalized rules and almost limitless options. As argued by Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba in their highly influential *Designing Social Inquiry*:

The rules of choice at the earliest stages of the research process are less formalized than are the rules for other research activities. There are texts on designing laboratory experiments on social choice, statistical criteria on drawing a sample for a survey of attitudes on public policy, and manuals on conducting participant observations of a bureaucratic officer. But there is no rule for choosing which research project to conduct, nor if we should decide to conduct field work, are there rules governing where we should conduct it.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, researchers seeking suitable questions should first consult the literature to identify key contested themes and important gaps in our collective knowledge, even if that results in simply asking “old questions” in new locations. A convenient (although imperfect) distinction can be made between descriptive and causal research. As an example of the former, researchers may choose to ask *how* individuals enlist into a violent nonstate entity.<sup>7</sup> Those seeking to contribute to a key contemporary debate may narrow this question to focus more specifically on the extent to which individuals in a specific location are self-propelled toward violence, or encouraged on this route by “mentors.”<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, researchers may wish to investigate *how* defections occur, for instance, through focusing on escape routes (in cases where this is relevant) and the facilitating role played by family or community members. An emphasis may also be placed on the reintegration process in specific cases, for instance, with the research focusing on key enablers and obstacles in relation to community acceptance.

Regarding causal research, a further distinction can be made between “causes-of-effects” and “effects-of-causes” questions.<sup>9</sup> The former includes broad investigations into *why* individuals exit from violent nonstate entities,<sup>10</sup> with the objective being to assess the contribution of multiple potential drivers. Adopting formal terminology, the “dependent variable” would be whether members leave the organization, and the “independent variables” (or “explanatory variables”) may include, for instance, disillusionment with its strategy or key personnel, the fear of continued involvement in armed conflict, and the guilt associated with contributing to violence. By contrast, effects-of-causes questions reverse this focus by placing the impact of specific independent variables under the spotlight. For instance, this may include investigating

the disputed effect of unemployment and other socioeconomic factors on enlistment. Alternatively, it may involve studying the extent to which foreign policies provide a partial motive for involvement in violence, particularly in Western locations.

Regarding causal questions specifically, it is worth elaborating on two common pitfalls associated primarily with the literature review phase of the research process. The first of these is a failure to recognize the importance of specific candidate independent variables, with Michael Jonsson's *A Farewell to Arms* providing a demonstrative example. This author draws on interviews and survey responses to investigate enlistment into four fronts of the Colombian *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), privileging the role of material incentives, ideology, belonging and security motives. This narrow focus is justified as follows:

Since I expect push-back on this choice, it should be emphasized that this model does not include all possible motives—any such model would also likely be very extensive—but it includes the four motives likely to be most prevalent amongst combatants in rebel groups. While one could think of several reasons to include additional motives, there are also strong reasons to refrain from doing so. Firstly, keeping the number of possible motives limited is consistent with the ideal of using models that are as parsimonious as possible. Secondly, this allows us to explore each of these motives in-depth by generating multiple motive indicators. Lastly, limiting the number of potential motives also brings out the implications clearer.<sup>11</sup>

While these three arguments do have some merit, there is little doubt that Jonsson's conclusions are distorted by his decision to not subject additional variables to the same level of scrutiny. At the very least, the author reduces the likelihood that other factors, such as status, adventure, and revenge, register as key drivers. While these variables have not received the same level of attention as those at the heart of *A Farewell to Arms*, they are also by no means at the margins of the literature. Indeed, they have been emphasized by prominent commentators such as Randy Borum, Martha Crenshaw, David Kilcullen, Alex P. Schmid, and Andrew Silke, among many others.<sup>12</sup> They also routinely appear in the case study literature, for instance, covering Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, and Somalia.<sup>13</sup> Rather than effectively removing such independent variables from the equation through a weakly justified *a priori* assumption about which motives are “likely to be most prevalent amongst combatants in rebel groups,” Jonsson should have used his research to test their relevance in the case of Colombia. His failure to do so detracts from what in other ways is an excellent study.

The second common pitfall associated particularly with the early stages of the research process is the tendency to overlook key insights from theory. Of course, there are a broad range of theoretical approaches that are of relevance to the topics at hand, including, for instance, frame alignment theory, social learning theory, rational choice theory (RCT), and the various stands of identity theory.<sup>14</sup> An illustrative example of an investigation that fails to incorporate key theoretical insights is provided by Mauricio Florez-Morris's neglect of RCT (although various other studies could have served for this purpose, including UNDP's recent *Journey to Extremism in Africa*).<sup>15</sup> Also focusing on enlistment in Colombia, this author emphasizes the relevance of wide variety of drivers, including:

The most popular motivation for joining a guerilla movement, stated by thirty-three (33) interviewees, was their concern regarding socioeconomic injustice and inequality, and the desire to improve these situations. In Ema's case, for instance, the process of joining M-19 [19 April Movement] began with her involvement in a college group, secretly organized by the M-19, which recruited those who were interested in working on social issues.<sup>16</sup>

Further down the list, Florez-Morris also highlights that:

The sixth most-mentioned reason for joining a guerilla movement was a feeling that they needed to respond to what they perceived as the excessive use of police force in response to legal demonstrations. Many of the subjects (10) who claimed this excessive repression as a motivation for joining the movement reported having witnessed situations where peaceful protests were broken up using excessive police force.<sup>17</sup>

While such grievances may partly explain *support for violence*, according to RCT they provide at best only indirect explanatory power as to why individuals become *personally involved in its creation*. The key argument is that supporters of violence should "free-ride" on the efforts of others in the knowledge that (a) this decision will enable them to avoid the potential costs of involvement, such as imprisonment, injury, and death, and (b) their personal participation would likely only negligibly contribute to the objectives of the violence in any case.<sup>18</sup> Narrow variants of RCT continue that "selective incentives," such as material gain (for instance, through a salary provided by the violent nonstate entity or the embezzlement of funds collected for the cause) and security-based drivers (either coercion by the nonstate entities in question or protection provided by these groups), may overcome this free-rider hurdle by providing enticements that are contingent on direct contributions to violence.<sup>19</sup> Broader variants of RCT also include selective psychosocial drivers such as status, belonging, adventure, and revenge (as discussed already in relation to the Jonsson study). Florez-Morris does incorporate certain selective incentives within his list, including a desire to overcome "restlessness" and the pursuit of "self-improvement." However, the point remains that variables such as inequality and excessive police force fail on the free-rider hurdle, and thus only indirectly explain involvement in violence according to RCT. One simple solution that would have allowed Florez-Morris to maintain focus on this breadth of independent variables would have been to divide his key research question into parallel enquiries into drivers of (a) support for violence *and* (b) actual involvement in its creation.

Of course, RCT proves controversial and certain researchers contest aspects of its logic, including the basic premise that individuals act in a "rational" manner. Yet this itself does not detract from the fact that free-riding is an empirically demonstrable reality that requires explanation. To offer two examples, Palestinian supporters of "suicide attacks" routinely far outnumber those directly engaged in this violence,<sup>20</sup> and the manpower estimates for the Taliban and other such organizations in Afghanistan represent a minute fraction of the population sympathetic to these groups.<sup>21</sup> This alone demonstrates that attitudes and behaviors represent two separate (albeit obviously interrelated) phenomena, that require parallel investigations. To be clear, this key disjuncture is often identified in the literature, including by high-profile authorities such as Randy Borum, John Horgan and Max Taylor, and Marc Sageman,<sup>22</sup> but progress with our collective understanding of this violence continues to stall partly because these distinct phenomena are still conflated through research almost by default.

## Establishing a Sample

Researchers who successfully access terrorist and violent extremist respondents often establish their sample through a process of networking. One common approach is widely known as “snowball sampling,” which was recently described in Mercy Corps’s *Motivations and Empty Promises* study on the Nigerian case as “researchers drawing on their own community knowledge to locate and build the trust of respondents, then relying on respondents to refer other interviewees.”<sup>23</sup> While this may be the most practical or indeed only realistic option in many locations, the snowballing technique is associated with an elevated risk of sample bias. This is because early interviewees may refer researchers to other likeminded group members, rather than a sample that is suitably varied in terms of their ideological affiliation, motives for enlistment, or other characteristics. Of course, not all studies aim to achieve representativeness, and researchers may instead deliberately select individuals of specific interest, for instance, including key commanders, high-profile defectors, and explosive manufacturers. Either way, research reports must be transparent about the sampling methods, at the very least to ensure that there are no misconceptions about representativeness if this has not been sought or achieved (as discussed further below).

Researchers fortunate enough to gain access to respondents in prisons or rehabilitation centers generally have fewer constraints regarding sampling (leaving to one side the issue of whether it is possible to encourage these individuals to talk openly). With a comparatively large population at their disposal, they can select between a limited number of in-depth interviews, an extensive sample of survey responses designed for quantitative analysis, or various intermediate options. The randomization techniques required for quantitative surveys within such facilities are in principle straightforward (unlike, for instance, household surveys), provided that a list of potential respondents is available. The options include applying the “RANDBETWEEN” function in Excel or equivalent formulae in other programs, or indeed even simply pulling names from a hat provided that the obvious precautions are taken to ensure consistency. The sample size is a key consideration as this figure, alongside the population size (the number of candidate respondents in the facility) and the desired confidence interval, determines the margin of error.<sup>24</sup> Of course, complications arise if selected candidates must be omitted on security grounds, or if they are unwilling to partake in the research, as this threatens representativeness. Even leaving this concern to one side, however, while such methods may in principle deliver representative samples *within* such facilities, sample biases in relation to the wider organization remain a distinct possibility. For instance, interviewees in prisons may be more committed to the cause than average members of the organization, and their capture may reflect a greater level of involvement or an increased willingness to take risks. Conversely, those based in rehabilitation centers may be more likely to defect than average, which also may explain their location of residency. The key point is again that researchers must be forthcoming about such issues in their reporting to avoid simply giving the impression of representativeness if this is in doubt.

Adding complexity to the research design, researchers may also decide to include control samples that differ in terms of outcome—in other words, creating variance on the dependent variable. For demonstrative purposes, it is worth elaborating on a study conducted by Ariel Merari and his colleagues that sampled from both “suicide” and

“non-suicide terrorists” in the Palestinian Territories, with the purpose of determining whether these two groups had distinct personality traits.<sup>25</sup> As the authors reveal, the former included fifteen individuals “who had been arrested in the process of trying to carry out a suicide attack,” with four caught at the intended site, ten *en route* to their location, and the final respondent detained the preceding day.<sup>26</sup> The latter group was comprised of twelve interviewees “who had been tried and jailed for participating in various political violence activities, ranging from stone throwing to armed assaults.”<sup>27</sup> Merari and his colleagues attempted to match these samples in terms of “age, marital status, education, and organizational affiliation” to control for such factors.<sup>28</sup> Their statistically significant findings included that the majority of the would-be martyrs had “avoidant and dependent” personality styles, whereas most from the comparison group had “impulsive and emotionally unstable styles.”<sup>29</sup>

Without wishing to underestimate the practical challenges faced by Merari and his colleagues, the difficulties associated with establishing control groups are substantially greater in other contexts. It is worth elaborating on potential pitfalls through focusing on UNDP’s recent *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report. This study draws numerous conclusions based on comparisons between a primary sample of violent extremist members and a “reference group” of individuals with no such affiliations. For instance, it finds that those from the former sample have much lower confidence that “elections can bring change,”<sup>30</sup> implying that this view may partially motivate recruitment. However, the report graphics reveal the two samples to be imperfectly matched in terms of age, childhood household religion and country of origin.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, no efforts were reportedly made to control for other potentially key “confounding variables,” including ethnicity, occupation, income level, and the levels of influence maintained by violent extremists in the regions of origin of the respondents. As such, an equally plausible alternative hypothesis is that the relationship between skepticism about elections and recruitment is spurious, and that instead these factors are *both* driven by certain of these additional variables.<sup>32</sup> The wider point is obviously that studies that do not control for a broad range of other factors risk drawing (or implying) incorrect conclusions. Of course, this point must be presented within context, as practical considerations in such challenging settings invariably interfere with optimal study design. At the very least these include that (a) it is not possible to know which control factors may be relevant in advance, (b) the inclusion of additional variables may require larger samples and/or research in a greater number of locations, and this may prove prohibitively expensive, and (c) such efforts may introduce unacceptable levels of security risk to the research team and potential respondents. Given such obstacles it is perhaps unsurprising that most studies entirely avoid control groups.

Of course, studies lacking control samples are often simply dismissed for the alleged methodological sin of “selecting on the dependent variable,” invariably by commentators with a quantitative leaning.<sup>33</sup> However, while variance on the dependent variable is entirely necessary for statistically based analysis, this is not the case for all forms of social science investigation, and the most straightforward way to refute this misguided stance is to observe that the absence of control samples simply changes the nature of the findings that may be presented.<sup>34</sup> For instance, while studies with suitable control groups may potentially determine the *average effect* of unemployment on enlistment in a specific location of interest, those lacking this additional sample can only discuss

with certainty the relationship between these variables *as it relates specifically to their case study respondents* (as discussed in greater detail in the *Presenting the Findings* section). There is nothing more inherently scientific about the former, it is simply a matter of distinct interpretations of causality. In any case, this narrowing of focus in the absence of control groups is often compensated for by an ability to delve deeper into the selected case studies, precisely because studies that select on the dependent variable concentrate their available resources to achieve this aim. This often implicitly takes the form of “process tracing,” which involves investigating the intervening causal mechanisms between the independent and dependent variables.<sup>35</sup>

## Designing the Instrument

The instrument (or “guide”) used to elicit information from terrorists and violent extremists should begin with an introductory section in which the purposes of the research are explained and clarifications are provided about the conditions of the respondents’ participation. Leaving to one side the issue of research ethics, this also encourages honest responses through allaying fears that this may be an exercise in intelligence-gathering. The initial set of questions are generally designed to collect demographic information such as age, gender, education, and occupation, and this is followed by modules with the core questions. If the purpose of the study is to analyze why individuals defect, these may include questions about the relevance of familial pressure, the guilt of contributing to violence, poor living conditions with the organization, the dangers associated with being a member, and disillusionment within the approach of the group. Alternatively, if the study focuses on key drivers of reintegration, specific questions may be about the role of family members and community leaders, return ceremonies, livelihoods training, and financial reinsertion packages. Researchers should be conscious of the potential for “research fatigue” when designing instruments, not only to avoid unnecessarily burdening interviewees, but also because responses often become less considered after a certain duration. That said, certain respondents may be willing and able to provide in-depth information over considerable periods of time, perhaps even spanning several days.<sup>36</sup>

While many researchers seemingly accept interviewee responses at face value, there should be no doubt that their immediate task is not only to collect data, but also to verify this information as much as possible during the interview process. Terrorists and violent extremists may provide false or misleading information, for instance, by offering opinions presented as “facts,” to be viewed favorably by the interviewer, because they are ill-informed, to discredit others, to avoid perceived threats associated with divulging information, to aggrandize their own role in events, through unwitting self-deception, or simply as their memories are flawed.<sup>37</sup> One common concern is that such respondents overemphasize the extent to which structural grievances explain their involvement in violence, even on occasion simply parroting the rhetoric of their organization, at the expense of “selfish” incentives such as status and adventure-seeking. Another is that they deliberately overstate the extent to which they were coerced into specific activities, aiming to reduce their own culpability. It is not possible to entirely overcome such issues, but one partial solution is to ask suitable probing questions at the relevant junctures (as discussed shortly). A second is to specifically incorporate validation questions within the instrument to confirm responses collected earlier

in the interview, ideally addressing prior themes from a new angle. Of course, researchers should also “triangulate” information as much as possible from other sources, although in practice this tends to be more relevant regarding factual data (e.g., relating to specific events), rather than perceptual or motivational information (for instance, drivers of enlistment and defection).

There is certainly no “correct” approach to designing an instrument, at the very least as this depends on the nature of the data required, as well as the personal preferences of each researcher. Nevertheless, for demonstrative purposes it is worth outlining certain techniques within a semi-structured instrument designed for qualitative or “medium-N” research with rank-and-file members on their motives for enlistment. Modules should generally begin with open questions as this allows respondents to express opinions in their own terms, while simultaneously enabling the researcher to gain a broad understanding of their perspective to guide subsequent questions. For instance, these may include:

- What do you think motivated most of *your comrades* to join [*group name*]?
- Looking back, what do *you* think motivated you to join [*group name*]?

Additional broad questions often prove valuable, particularly if the prior ones elicit only limited information. For instance, these may include:

- Do you think most of *your comrades* felt that [*group name*] could create a better society?
- Looking back, did *you* think that [*group name*] could create a better society?

This technique of pairing questions about the interviewee with preceding ones about “your comrades” (an approach that may be applied throughout the interview) obviously generates additional data for subsequent analysis. It also helps alleviate possible concerns that the process may be an exercise in intelligence gathering through demonstrating a broader focus of interest than only the respondent. To further reinforce this latter point, it is often worth adding the following (in applicable cases):

- When I ask about your comrades, I am interested in their motives and opinions in a general sense, and I am not looking for you to provide me with the names of specific individuals.

As the interview progresses the questions should become more specific, for instance:

- Looking back, did you agree with the [*group name*] ideology when you joined?

Of course, complex concepts such as ideology require “unpacking,” and an explanation of this term should be provided to the respondent either before the question or immediately prior to his or her response. It is also often worth enquiring about the extent to which the ideology was understood, not least as the answer may help confirm or undermine the response provided to the above question. Of course, individuals can subscribe to ideologies even if the nuance of such frameworks is only partially comprehended, but it is often still worth asking:

- Looking back, would you say that you had a good understanding of the [group name] ideology before you joined? Or, would you say that you did not really understand it at that point?

Questions should also be added about specific grievances, such as the following:

- Looking back, did you think police violence was a problem at the time you joined [group name]?
- Do you think that this contributed to your decision to join [group name]?

Other pertinent grievances may include, for instance, identity-based inequality, discrimination, poverty, unemployment, foreign policy decision, and “irreligious” social conduct. Of course, seasoned researchers will observe that there is a risk of “leading” respondents through intentionally highlighting specific topics such as these, but this is generally outweighed by the need to ensure that all relevant subjects are discussed. Certain of the above themes are less likely to arise “organically” without prompting, irrespective of their actual relevance, and on balance researchers are probably more likely to develop a distorted understanding through *not* specifically asking about such issues. In any case, the risk of leading respondents can be reduced through coupling questions in the manner of those relating to police violence above, confirming first that this violence was considered a problem, and only then asking whether the respondent believes that this contributed to his or her decision to enlist.

The above pattern of paired questions should be continued regarding individual incentives. For instance, this may involve asking:

- Looking back, did you expect that membership of [group name] would be exciting?
- Do you think that this contributed to your decision to join [group name]?

Other such incentives may include, for instance, material benefits (including a salary or payments-in-kind, and opportunities to loot or embezzle funds collected for the cause), revenge, coercion, protection, and belonging. Suitable follow-on questions aiming to generate a more nuanced understanding may include:

- Why might individuals think that membership would be exciting?
- Why might individuals think they may gain status through joining?
- Who would individuals seek to gain revenge against through joining?
- Who threatened you / others to join, and what was the specific threat?

As observed above, certain respondents may consistently return the discussion to grievances when asked about individual incentives, at which point it is worth considering an overarching probe to the effect of:

- Many people support [group name] because they are aggrieved by [list grievances mentioned by the respondent], but only some become actively involved with the group. What do you think it is that motivated you to become actively involved, but not others?

The intention is obviously to convey the point that while grievances may be relevant, there is a strong case that they provide only indirect explanations for enlistment (as discussed in relation to the Florez-Morris study in the *Establishing Key Research Questions* section).

Switching attention to closed questions for quantitative research, preparatory explanations often prove valuable, such as the following:

- I am going to list several potential motives for joining [*group name*] and then ask you to tell me how important each of these were to you when you joined. For each of these potential motives, please tell me if you think they were (a) very important, (b) somewhat important, (c) not very important, or (d) not important at all.

This is then followed by the specific questions, often adopting a Likert scale system of response options, such as:

- Some people may join a group such as [*group name*] as they think this will enable them to gain status. How important do you think that the pursuit of status was regarding *your* decision to join [*group name*] **[READ EACH OF THE BELOW RESPONSE OPTIONS, EXCLUDING THE FINAL TWO]**?
  1. Very important
  2. Somewhat important
  3. Not very important
  4. Not important at all
  5. Don't know
  6. No answer

The final two options are worth including for all closed questions, not least as they can provide a signal that questions have been poorly understood, or have been deemed excessively sensitive by the respondents. Of course, for quantitative research there is a need to ensure uniformity of approach in cases where the investigation is conducted by a team. In particular, enumerators should be trained to read the questions exactly as they are phrased in the instrument, and to follow instructions such as those provided in brackets above. In this case, the purpose of asking the researchers to read the list of response options is both to remind the interviewees of the potential answers, and to help prevent the question becoming leading though reinforcing the point that “not very important” and “not important at all” are perfectly legitimate answers.

Of course, asking separate questions about each potential motive (as with this example of status) can be onerous, and there are circumstances under which it may be necessary to adopt a more concise approach, especially if there are already concerns about the length of the instrument. In this scenario, it is possible to ask one or a limited number of general questions about reasons for enlistment, with the candidate motives (for instance, ideology, belonging, status, and other factors listed above) offered to the interviewees as the potential response options. In such cases, enumerators should be instructed to record multiple responses on the basis that most individuals tend not to enlist for one reason alone. This can be achieved, for instance, through directions to “circle the first three responses given” or “circle all responses given.” There are arguments in favor of both these options, but the critical point is again that all enumerators adopt a standard approach to produce consistent

data. The order of the response options should also ideally be varied between the respondents in a systematic manner as a consistent list may distort the findings. For instance, it is possible that interviewees frequently select the first option simply as it is easiest to recall due to its position.

## Presenting the Findings

This final core section focuses on two frequently occurring issues that relate to the presentation of findings. The first of these is the common lack of transparency in studies that involve interviews with terrorist and violent extremist respondents.<sup>38</sup> While it is recognized that researchers must often withhold specific details on security grounds, this does not excuse the deficiency of information frequently offered about sampling methods.<sup>39</sup> As previously observed, at the very least the reader must be provided with a sense of the degree to which the sample may deviate from representativeness (whether involuntarily or by design) as this heavily influences the interpretation of findings. For instance, while Anneli Botha draws firm conclusions about the relationship between political socialization and enlistment into al-Shabaab, she neglects to mention whether her sample was comprised of “regular” rank-and-file members, ideologues who remained committed to the cause, defectors who renounced their prior association, and so on.<sup>40</sup> As such, the reader has no sense of the extent to which her findings may be “typical,” or specific to the sample in question. Similarly, while Fernando Reinares focuses on factors such as democratization and disillusionment as motives for disengagement from ETA, the reader is offered no information about whether his sample, for instance, is drawn from only specific parts of the Basque Country, represents only certain subunits of the group, and so on.<sup>41</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, the Ariel Merari et al. paper discussed above proves to be exemplary in that not only does it outline their approaches to research in detail (see the *Establishing a Sample* section on the latter), but it also offers guidance about the possible implications of these approaches.<sup>42</sup>

There is also no excuse for a failure to emphasize concerns associated with the truthfulness and reliability of the responses offered by terrorist and violent extremist interviewees (as discussed in the previous section), so that readers again exercise due caution in interpreting the findings. In practice, this critical caveat is also generally absent from articles that draw from such respondents.<sup>43</sup> There are notable exceptions, including Mercy Corps’s *Motivations and Empty Promises* study on the Nigerian case, which highlights that:

The highly sensitive topic also meant that some respondents might have been unwilling or unable to share their complete stories. Whether through fear of reprisal by Boko Haram members, being punished by the government authorities, Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), or vigilantes, or being scorned in their communities, many reasons exist to explain why respondents might hesitate to share information or modify their responses. We also learned that the degree to which youth participated directly in violent acts may affect whether and how their communities accept them once they return from Boko Haram; thus, they were likely less open to speaking about their roles within the group.<sup>44</sup>

The second common issue worth highlighting in relation to the presentation of findings is the tendency for researchers to make inferences beyond what their samples will allow. A striking example is provided by Jerrold M. Post, who draws from interviews with individuals from Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad, among others, in his award-winning *When Hatred is Bred in the Bone*. His central thesis is that “social psychology provides the

most powerful lens through which to examine and explain terrorist behavior,”<sup>45</sup> culminating with the assertion that:

This fusing of the individual to the group is found across *all organizations* regardless of ideological affiliation. As individual identity succumbs to the organization, there is no room for individuality—individual ideas, individual identity, and individual decision-making—while at the same time self-perceived success becomes more and more linked to the organization. Individual self-worth is again intimately tied to the “value” or prominence of the group—therefore *each individual* has a vested interest in ensuring not only the success of the organization, but to increase its prominence and exposure. [emphasis added]<sup>46</sup>

While there is little doubt that this “fusing” *may* occur in specific instances, the author certainly has no grounds to draw conclusions about “all organizations” and “each individual.” Indeed, this bold assertion is simply refuted through highlighting that many members are indifferent to the ideology and objectives of the organization to which they belong, particularly in cases where enlistment is driven substantially by coercion and economic incentives.<sup>47</sup>

Returning to the “selecting on the dependent variable” discussion presented above, inappropriate inferences are also occasionally found in studies that lack control samples. For instance, Anneli Botha asserts that her research:

Identified a number of personal factors that contributed to the radicalization process of the individuals joining violent extremism in both Kenya and Somalia. ... Starting with the theory that an absent parent, especially a father figure contributes to later radicalization, the study in Kenya found that within the sample group, 18 percent of al-Shabaab and 31 percent of MRC [Mombasa Republican Council] respondents grew up without a father, while 16 percent of al-Shabaab and 20 percent of MRC respondents grew up without a mother. In the case of al-Shabaab, 11 respondents grew up without both parents present. ... Most al-Shabaab and MRC respondents lost a parent(s) between early adolescence and early adulthood, at a time individuals are particularly vulnerable to a loss of this magnitude.<sup>48</sup>

Botha is seemingly careful to avoid explicitly stating that the absence of parents *definitely does* contribute to radicalization in a broad sense, but this is heavily implied by the text, and many of her readers will undoubtedly draw this conclusion. Yet, while absent parents may partially explain the radicalization of specific individuals, Botha has certainly not demonstrated that this is a general causal factor. In the absence of a suitable control sample (or other relevant data about absent parents), the author has simply failed to demonstrate a correlation between these variables—a necessary first step to establishing causality as understood within the quantitative tradition.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, it is entirely plausible (although perhaps unlikely) that there is an inverse relationship between these two factors. Put another way, it is conceivable that in the population at large those lacking parents at formative stages of their lives may be on average *less* likely to radicalize. Unfortunately, such implicit inferences beyond what the sample allows are a recurrent feature in the work of this author, covering themes such as education levels, employment and trust in the political process.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

The past decade has witnessed a substantial increase in the absolute number of studies collecting primary data from terrorists and violent extremists. While this development is certainly welcomed, the quality of these studies varies substantially, and concerns relate to various repeating methodological issues. For instance, researchers often seemingly accept

interviewee responses at face value, overlook key theoretical insights, downplay or neglect potentially important explanatory variables, fail to offer sufficient information about their sampling methods, and deliver findings with inferences beyond what their sample allows. While primary research with terrorists and violent extremists presents unique challenges, these issues are largely unrelated to such obstacles. Within this context, the dual purposes of this article were to discuss ways to overcome these recurrent methodological problems, and to provide wider guidance regarding primary research with such respondents. It is applicable to detail-oriented case study research, quantitative surveys, and intermediate “medium-N” research, drawing from the author’s experiences of conducting such studies for programming and policy audiences.

## Notes

1. Andrew Silke, “The Impact of 9/11 on Research on Terrorism,” in Magnus Ranstorp, ed., *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Directions*, (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 77.
2. See, for instance, Daniel J. Harris, Pete Simi, and Gina Ligon, “Reporting Practices of Journal Articles that Include Interviews with Extremists,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39(7–8) (2016), pp. 602–616.
3. UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* (UNDP, 2017), New York.
4. A broad range of texts are available on analysis, covering quantitative and qualitative approaches. For instance, see, Alan Bryman and Duncan Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis for Social Scientists* (London: Routledge, 1990); Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Catherine Marsh and Jane Elliott, *Exploring Data* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Charles C. Ragin, *Redesigning Social Inquiry, Fuzzy Sets and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; and Simeon J. Yates, *Doing Social Science Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2004).
5. On such matters, see, for instance, Adam Dolnik, ed., *Conducting Terrorism Field Research: A Guide* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013); Kristine Hoglund and Magnus Oberg, eds., *Understanding Peace Research: Methods and Challenges* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011); John Horgan, “The Case for First-hand Research,” in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievement and Failures* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004); Chandra Lekha Sriram, John C. King, Julie A. Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega, and Johanna Herman, eds., *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009); and Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civic War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 31–50.
6. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 14.
7. References are made throughout this article to organizational “membership” and processes such as “joining” and “enlisting in” violent nonstate entities. These terms are applied as shorthand, as in reality such matters are often far less formalized or official than such expressions perhaps imply.
8. An influential account favouring the former is Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 122.
9. This division is presented in Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Quantitative and Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 41–50.
10. While not necessarily articulated in this exact manner, this is essentially a question asked by, for instance, Kate Barrelle, “Pro-integration: Disengagement from and Life after Extremism,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 7(2) (2015), pp. 129–142; Julie Chernov Hwang, “The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists: Understanding the Pathways,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29 (2017), pp. 277–295; Neil Ferguson, “Disengaging from Terrorism: A Northern Irish

- Experience,” *Journal of Deradicalization* 6 (2016), pp. 1–23; John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009); Michael Jonsson, *A Farewell to Arms: Motivational Change and Divergence Inside FARC-EP 2002–2010* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2014); and Fernando Reinares, “Exit from Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement Deradicalization Among Members of ETA,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, no. 23 (2011), pp. 780–803.
11. Jonsson, *A Farewell to Arms*, p. 38.
  12. See, for instance, Randy Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism* (Tampa: University of South Florida, 2004), 24; Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13(4) (1981), p. 394; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 40–41, 85; Alex P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, Deradicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review* (The Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism, 2013); and Andrew Silke, “Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization,” *European Journal of Criminology* 5(1) (2008), pp. 115–117.
  13. For instance, on the cases of Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, and Somalia, see, James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation*, RUSI Whitehall Report 2–16 (2016), pp. 12–13.
  14. A broad review of key theories is provided by Randy Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*. Narrower accounts on specific theories are provided, for instance, by James Ron, “Ideology in Context: Explaining Sendero Luminoso’s Tactical Escalation,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 5 (2001), 569–592; Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman, “Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009); 537–559; and Michael J Williams and Samuel C. Lindsey, “A Social Psychological Critique of the Saudi Terrorism Risk Reduction Initiative,” *Psychology, Crime and Law* 20, no. 2 (2014), 135–151.
  15. Mauricio Florez-Morris, “Joining Guerrilla Groups in Colombia: Individual Motivations and Processes for Entering a Violent Organization,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (2007), pp. 615–634; UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 620.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 621.
  18. This theory is explained in greater detail, for instance, in James Khalil, “Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture between Attitudes and Behaviors at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37(2) (2014), pp. 198–211; and Khalil and Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism*, pp. 9–10.
  19. While selective incentives provide the most prominent solutions to the free-rider problem, they are not the only ones, as outlined by Will H. Moore, “‘Rational Rebels’ Overcoming the Free-Rider Problem,” *Political Science Quarterly* 48(2) (1995), pp. 417–454.
  20. On support for such violence, see Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (London: Hurst, 2007), pp. 227–232.
  21. Compare, for instance, Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerilla*, pp. 48–49; and Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 33–37; with Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2011: A Survey of the Afghan People* (2011), pp. 48–52. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/2754804.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2017).
  22. See, for instance, Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4(4) (2011), p. 9; John Horgan and Max Taylor, “Disengagement, De-radicalization and the Arc of Terrorism: Future Directions for Research,” in Rik Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge: European and American Experiences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 174; and Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 90.
  23. Mercy Corps, *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Formers Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth* (Mercy Corps, 2016), p. 9.
  24. For more information on this technical matter, see Herbert F. Weisberg, Jon A. Krosnick, and Bruce D. Bowen, *An Introduction to Survey Research, Polling, and Data Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 67–76.

25. Ariel Merari, Ilan Diamant, Arie Bibi, Yoav Broshi, and Giora Zakin, "Personality Characteristics of 'Self-Martyrs'/'Suicide Bombers' and Organizers of Suicide Attacks," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (2010), pp. 87–101. While not discussed here, this study also focuses on a comparison group of attack organizers.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
30. UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, p. 66.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 26, and 27.
32. This issue is explained in greater detail in Bryman and Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis*, pp. 220–222.
33. This stance is widely associated with King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, pp. 129–132.
34. For much more detailed refutations of the argument that selecting on the dependent variable is methodologically unsound, see, for instance, James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, "A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research," *Political Analysis* 14 (2006), pp. 239–241; Goertz and Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures*, pp. 178–181. Also see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, p. 23.
35. On process tracing, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, pp. 205–232.
36. See, for instance, Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, p. xxi.
37. This discussion draws from Khalil and Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 17; and James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, "A Case Study of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programming: Lessons from OTT's Kenya Transition Initiative," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 3(1) (2014), p. 6. Also see, Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, pp. 105–106; and Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action*, pp. 33–40.
38. This issue is also discussed in Harris, Simi, and Ligon, "Reporting Practices," p. 609.
39. Insufficient information is provided, for instance, by Barrelle, "Pro-integration"; Anneli Botha, "Factors Facilitating Radicalization in Kenya and Somalia," in Sara Zeiger, ed., *Expanding Researching on Countering Violent Extremism* (Hedayah and Edith Cowen University, 2016), pp. 71–83; Chernov Hwang, "The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists"; Ferguson, "Disengaging from Terrorism"; Jerrold M. Post, Ehud Sprinzak, and Laurita M. Denny, "The Terrorists in their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15(1) (2003), pp. 171–184; Reinares, "Exit from Terrorism"; and UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*.
40. Anneli Botha, "Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization Among Individuals who Joined al-Shabaab in Kenya," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37 (2014), pp. 895–919.
41. Fernando Reinares, "Exit from Terrorism."
42. Merari et al., "Personality Characteristics."
43. This includes, for instance, Barrelle, "Pro-Integration"; Botha, "Political Socialization"; Botha, "Factors Facilitating Radicalization"; Chernov Hwang, "The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists"; Ferguson, "Disengaging from Terrorism"; Florez-Morris, "Joining Guerrilla Groups"; Post et al., "The Terrorists in their Own Words"; Reinares, "Exit from Terrorism"; and Marcella Ribetti, "The Unveiled Motivations of Violence in Intra-State Conflicts: The Colombian Guerrillas," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18(4) (2007), pp. 699–720.
44. Mercy Corps, *Motivations and Empty Promises*, p. 10.
45. Jerrold M. Post, "When Hatred is Bred in the Bone: Psycho-cultural Foundations of Contemporary Terrorism," *Political Psychology* 26(4) (2005), p. 617.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 629.
47. See, for instance, Khalil, "Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions," pp. 203–207; and Khalil and Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 13.
48. Botha, "Factors Facilitating Radicalization," pp. 72–73.
49. See, for instance, Bryman and Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis*, pp. 8–16.
50. See, for instance, Botha, "Political Socialization," pp. 905–909.