

The background of the entire page is a light teal network diagram consisting of interconnected nodes and lines. The word "RESOLVE" is written in a large, bold, dark teal font, with "NETWORK" in a smaller, all-caps, dark teal font directly below it. A thin black diagonal line is positioned to the right of the word "RESOLVE".

**RESOLVE**  
NETWORK

# Analyzing Interviews with Terrorists

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**Just as a very simple marker** when me and you [author] were PhD students the first thing you would hear at conferences and so on, and in reviews in the literature, was ‘there was no data’, ‘there is no data’, ‘no data’...You don’t get questions anymore about lack of data. What you get questions about is inter-coder reliability, ‘what were your original sources?’ So even the questions you are being fielded are far more sophisticated. That’s a massive leap in the small ten years that I have been engaged in it.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

For years the dominant narrative has been that there is a dearth of primary sources in terrorism studies.<sup>2</sup> This is now changing. The talk about the scarcity of data is gradually being replaced by discussions of a “data revolution”<sup>3</sup> and a “golden age”<sup>4</sup> of terrorism research. We are now publishing more research based on the analysis of primary source data than ever before.<sup>5</sup> Included in this has been some ground-breaking interview research with recent and former terrorists—research that could define how we think about terrorist involvement for years to come. With this increased access to data, if our research is to have any analytical value and concurrently respected both within and outside of academia, we need to actively consider how we analyze it.<sup>6</sup>

Analytical considerations must be guided by the research questions we are trying to answer. In order to be most effective, research questions and analytical considerations need to be thought through before data collection even begins and thus guide the data collection process. After all, if terrorism studies is to continue to advance as a field, then we need to demonstrate that when we do have access to these data that we are analyzing them appropriately. In this needs to be an appreciation for what our data can and cannot tell us. This appreciation for the limits of the data and the separate analytical techniques will only serve to strengthen the research. As the opening quote from Paul Gill intimates, we are now moving away from those continuous refrains of “there is no data” and we must now have more sophisticated discussions about how to make best use of the data when we do have access. This applies to both qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

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1 Paul Gill, Interview, *Talking Terror* (Season 1 Episode 15, 2017).

2 Andrew Silke, “The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research,” in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (Routledge, 2004), 186-213. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203500972.ch10>.

3 This was the theme of the 2019 annual international conference of the Society for Terrorism Research.

4 Andrew Silke and Jennifer Schmidt-Petersen, “The Golden Age? What the 100 Most Cited Articles in Terrorism Studies Tell Us,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 4 (2017): 692-712.

5 Bart Schuurman, “Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (2018): 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023>.

6 Thomas Hegghammer, *The Future of Terrorism Studies*, Talk at Intelligence, National Security, and War, Naval War College, RI, 2013.

Large datasets invariably give us a broad, but shallow, understanding of terrorism and terrorist actors. They allow for us to get a broad understanding on trends in terrorist activity, and the demographic categories of terrorist actors, their targets, and their victims. These are, of course, invaluable resources to have. However, first-hand interviews can give us the depth of understanding missing from these sources. These two approaches to terrorism research are significantly different. We must therefore not fall into the trap of applying the same analytical criteria when assessing the value of the findings from the research.

First-hand interviews are hugely important in the establishment and development of our understanding of terrorist actors and their motivations. For these interviews to bring value to the field they do not need large sample sizes. We have seen fascinating and enlightening individual case studies based on the interviews with just one person.<sup>7</sup> However, in order to get the most out of the valuable data gained from these interviews, researchers must consider how we best approach and present the analysis of the interview data. There are excellent examples of this throughout the field already, some of which will be addressed in this chapter.

This chapter discusses some of the issues that need to be taken into consideration when analyzing these first-hand interviews, including the importance of specificity, different available analytic techniques, the role of triangulation, and ethical practices. Some of the points raised in the chapter may seem overly basic. However, if we get the basics wrong at the beginning of the analytical process it is difficult to regain any analytical value to the research. The issues addressed should by no means be considered an exhaustive list of recommendations, and in fact should not be seen as uniquely relevant for analyzing interviews with terrorist actors. Many of the recommendations contained in this chapter will be relevant across a variety of fields and with a diversity of categories of interviewees.

The insights in this chapter are based on my own experiences interviewing Irish republican paramilitaries who had previously been involved in the Troubles<sup>8</sup> in Northern Ireland. The chapter is equally influenced by engaging with the ever-growing interview-based research from within terrorism studies literature and having the repeated envious feeling of ‘I wish I had done things that way.’ My own inter-disciplinary background in psychology, international relations, and criminology, and the approaches to analysis of interviews from each of those disciplines has also guided me in the focus of the chapter. This, therefore, does not include consideration of other equally relevant disciplines, and their approaches to interview analysis.

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7 John Horgan, Mary Beth Altier, Neil Shortland, and Max Taylor, “Walking Away: The Disengagement and De-radicalization of a Violent Right-wing Extremist,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 9, no. 2 (2017): 63-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2016.1156722>.

8 John F. Morrison, *The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism: The Role and Impact of Organizational Splits* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

# SPECIFICITY MATTERS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCH DESIGN & ANALYSIS

In their analysis of the role of mental health in terrorism studies, Paul Gill and Emily Corner made a short but hugely important statement: “Specificity matters.”<sup>9</sup> This statement is applicable across terrorism studies and academia as a whole. In the analysis of interviews we need to consider the role of specificity across each stage of the interview process.

## Specificity in Research Questions

We must be specific about what exactly our research questions are asking. Specificity brings with it a realistic focus as to what is achievable. For example, if our research question is “what leads a person to turn to political violence?”<sup>10</sup> we are potentially setting ourselves up for failure. The broadness of this question makes it close to impossible to answer. As Jessica Stern notes, the difficulty in answering such a broad question is not unique to terrorism scholarship, when compared against researchers in other fields trying to predict human behavior.<sup>11</sup> However, if we are specific in relation to who, where, and when we are talking about, then this becomes more achievable, if still extremely challenging.

## Specificity in Population Choice and Samples

The focus on specificity in the development of research questions will help us decide what research methods and analytical techniques are available to us. This can also help us to clearly identify our population and develop our interview samples. The population is the entire group from which individual interviewees could be recruited from. In contrast, the sample is the actual group of individuals who are interviewed. The more specific and focused you can be in determining these categories, the more powerful your later analysis is likely to be.

When considering the specificity in terms of a population and sample, one can consider a variety of questions. What is your population? Are you focused on all terrorists? All terrorist supporters? If the population you select is as broad as “all terrorist supporters”, you are unlikely to be able to find anything meaningful in your research. Similarly if you identify your population as being all members of ISIS, or the Provisional IRA, or the LTTE, or any other terrorist group, your data and subsequent analyses are unlikely to provide as in-depth an insight into the actions and decision-making process of the membership of the

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9 Paul Gill and Emily Corner, “There and Back Again: The Study of Mental Disorder and Terrorist Involvement,” *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 237. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000090>.

10 Marc Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (2014): 565-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895649>.

11 Jessica Stern, “Response to Marc Sageman’s ‘The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,’” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no.4 (2014): 607-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895654>.

chosen group. However, if in place of these broad base populations you define your population in more specific terms, doing so will more likely to lead to analytical success.

## Specificity in Time

In order to identify a population, we can consider a range of different factors outside of purely which group an individual was a member of or which ideology they supported. Instead of such broad selections, we need to consider what population is the most relevant for the specific research questions. One important consideration is the issue of temporality. When was the individual active? When were they radicalized? When were they first engaged in terrorist activity? When did they disengage? In defining our population(s), we must be able to specify the timeframe of the relevant activity we are considering. The decision-making processes at one stage of an organization's evolution and existence is likely to be significantly different to another. If your research is trying to understand why people joined the Provisional IRA, for example, the reasons are likely to be different across different periods of the organization's existence. This should in no way deter us from interviewing across time-periods. Appreciation for the importance of timing, however, will provide the opportunity for in-depth within group comparisons and therefore, greater opportunity to assess the effects of context on individual and group actions.

## Specificity in Location

Alongside temporality must be an understanding of the importance of place. Where were the individuals active, radicalized, and/or disengaged? Location must not just consider the countries, provinces, towns, or villages where people are active—it can be much more focused than this. If deemed relevant, interview populations could be from one specific part of a town or village, as small as a street or a housing estate. To illustrate the importance of recognizing the value of place, one could consider the extreme comparison between two individuals, same age, same gender, same employment status both joining IS in 2020. One is joining from Raqqa, and the other from London. While they are both ostensibly joining the same group at the same time with similar backgrounds, the reason(s) behind their decisions to join could be drastically different based on their lived experiences as a result of where they are from.

The importance of place is not just relevant in these clear transnational disparities in international terrorist groups. In my own research on Irish republican groups, it is clear on analysis that the reason why someone joins an Irish Republican paramilitary can be as much based on local grievances, as on the nationalized aims of the groups. Therefore, the rationale of someone joining in Derry City may be different to those joining in Belfast, and especially different from those joining in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, or any other city south of the border. This is even before one compares rural to urban areas. And, even within cities, we appreciate the potential for different localized grievances effecting people's decision-making processes. Taking Belfast as an example one may need to consider the differences between someone's decision making processes in Ardoyne in comparison to the Lower Falls Road, two places barely two miles apart from each other. One's consideration of time and place may not always need to be this fine-grained. Consideration of the research aims alongside the population will decide how focused these will need to be.

## Specificity in Individual Roles

Alongside the consideration of time and place, interviews can also consider the roles played and positions held within the organization by members of the population. As has been often noted, terrorists are not homogenous.<sup>12</sup> A focus on role and position shows a respect for this heterogeneity. Focusing on a wide variety of terrorist roles can also provide greater clarity as to who our findings may actually relate to, as well as define who a chosen sample can, and cannot, be compared to both within and outside of a particular terrorist organization. By providing this respect for heterogeneity, focusing on specificity of an individual's role moves us away from the often times nebulous discussions about "the terrorist."<sup>13</sup> It can thus allow for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a terrorist and the different interpretations and experiences that comes with it.

## Specificity in Interview Context

When conducting and analyzing interviews with terrorist actors, the role of context must always be considered. While it is clear that we need to understand the context of their involvement, as discussed earlier, we must also be aware of the context(s) in which the interviews are conducted. Interviews do not take place in a vacuum. There are a variety of contextual factors which can and do influence the data collected. An awareness of context can assist in our analysis to ascertain any role the context may have played on an individual's responses and the direction the interview took.

Relevant contexts can refer to national, local, and individual issues and situations. An awareness of context can range from an understanding of significant news events and the influence they can have on individual responses, to being cognizant of the role that an interview location or timing can play. For example, interview-based research that takes place within a prison, or another detention facility, must always consider the effect this setting can have on participants' responses. Therefore, the restricted nature of this and similar settings needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing responses. When and where possible, it would be beneficial to have a non-detained control-group, if relevant for the specific research questions.

The very first interview I ever did in this area was with a leading member of a dissident Irish republican organization. This was an individual who had a long history of involvement in the Irish Republican Movement. The opening question of this interview was 'how did you first become involved in Irish republicanism?' In an answer that lasted approximately 7 minutes they continuously emphasized the role of the Irish language in strengthening their affiliation to the movement and as a demonstration of why they were a 'true republican.' Being unaware of the context would lead one to place great emphasis on the role which the Irish language played in this individual's initial involvement. However, on the day that the

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12 Petter Nesser, "Toward an Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat: A Chronology of Jihadist Terrorism in Europe 2008–2013," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014): 440-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.893405>.

13 If we are to gain an in-depth understanding of those involved in terrorism the concept of "the terrorist" is overly simplistic and does not reflect the diversity and heterogeneity of terrorist actors.

interview took place, there was extensive discussion within the local media about the level of spoken Irish of a leading member of Sinn Féin, the party the interviewee had left a number of years previously. Eight months later I re-interviewed the same individual, and once again asked that opening question. At no stage in this interview did they mention the role of the Irish language. However, they did emphasize other issues which had been raised in the original interview. This re-interview, and the awareness of the context in which it took place, assisted with the interview analysis.

Similarly, in her analysis of the life histories of those who disengaged from Indonesian jihadists organizations, Julie Chernov Hwang exemplifies the application of the re-interview. By re-interviewing participants three to five times in her excellent research she gained some traction in dissipating the effects that the interviewing context(s) may have played on her analysis, and also provided opportunities for her to gain trust with the interviewees, enabling them to speak more openly.<sup>14</sup> We are not all fortunate enough to be able to re-interview participants. However, even if we are, we must never ignore the role that the interview context can and does play.

## ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES: FUNDAMENTALS & EXAMPLES

The above outlines a number of elements relevant for researchers when choosing the appropriate analytical technique. Some of the considerations listed above will be more relevant for some analytical techniques than others. We have a variety of analytical techniques to analyze interviews. However, a 2016 assessment of reporting practices in journal articles featuring interviews with extremists found that 65.9% of the sample of articles analyzed were entirely or almost entirely absent of a transparent analytical method. This was explained as being the result of the majority of interviews being qualitative and descriptive in nature, and therefore not being held to the same analytical standards as quantitative analysis.<sup>15</sup> Even with this, somewhat debatable, caveat one would have expected that there would, as a bare minimum, be an acknowledgement of what approach was utilized. This lack of analytical rigor and transparency would not be acceptable in most disciplines. so why is it deemed as acceptable in terrorism studies? Focusing on psychology of terrorism literature in particular, Orla Lynch and Carmel Joyce note that “much of the psychological literature on terrorism could be described as tokenism and would be readily disputed, perhaps even rejected, if attempts were made to publish it in key psychological journals.”<sup>16</sup> Without clear analytical processes in place, similar claims could be made about other disciplines as well when it comes to interview research.

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14 Julie Chernov Hwang, *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists* (USA: Cornell University, 2018), xiv.

15 Daniel J. Harris, Pete Simi, and Gina Scott Ligon, “Reporting Practices of Journal Articles that Include Interviews with Extremists,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 7-8 (2016): 602-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1141009>.

16 Orla Lynch, and Carmel Joyce, *Applying Psychology: The Case of Terrorism and Political Violence* (USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 1-2.

There are a range of rigorous and theoretically grounded analytical techniques available to researchers from across a wide variety of disciplines. For this area of research to improve its reputation both within and outside of academia,<sup>17</sup> we need to demonstrate higher levels of analytical sophistication and transparency. This will assist in strengthening the replicability of the research, alongside the strengthening of readers' confidence in the appropriateness of the research approach(es) taken. Below, I briefly outline and introduce three of the various analytical approaches that can be used in interview analysis. There are a range of other analytical approaches which could have been chosen for illustration of the options out there. Therefore, the selection of these three does not advocate them as being "better" approaches than those excluded. It is only the research aims and available data that can help us decide which approach is best for a specific research project.

When choosing the appropriate analytical approach, there are certain fundamentals that need to be first considered:

1. Is the analytical technique appropriate for the data?
2. Is the analytical technique appropriate for the research question(s) or hypotheses?
3. Do you, as the researcher(s), have the relevant training and expertise to utilize the analytical technique appropriately?

If the answer to each of these ostensibly simple questions is "yes," then the appropriate technique has been chosen. Within question 2, researchers need to address whether their research is inductive<sup>18</sup> or deductive.<sup>19</sup> This will provide further guidance as to what approach will be suitable for your specific project. Some analytical approaches are particularly designed for either inductive or deductive research, as outlined below.

## Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical approach that can be used across a wide range of research questions. It can be applied when working with large qualitative datasets and when working in research teams as well as by individual researchers.<sup>20</sup> At its most basic level it provides researchers with the ability to analyze, organize, describe, and report themes identified in the data.<sup>21</sup> As with many of the analytical techniques available, there are a variety of approaches to thematic analysis. In reality thematic analysis is an umbrella term for a cluster of approaches to analyzing qualitative data. The approaches share the

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17 Thomas Hegghammer, "The Future of Terrorism Studies," *Talk at Intelligence, National Security, and War*, Naval War College, RI, 2013.

18 Inductive research is aiming to develop a theory.

19 Deductive research is designed to test a pre-existing theory.

20 Lorelli S. Nowell, Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules, "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1609406917733847>.

21 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.

focus of identifying patterns of meaning within the analyzed data.<sup>22</sup> Therefore it is imperative that in presenting our analytical approach we emphasize which form of thematic analysis was used and what steps we took throughout the analytical process. The theoretical flexibility of thematic analysis means that it can either be inductive or deductive in nature.

## Thematic Analysis in Research

In their analysis of **social networks, leadership, and change** in al-Muhajiroun, Kenney et al. utilized thematic analysis to analyse their qualitative interview dataset.<sup>23</sup> They approached the research in a deductive manner to test a series of hypotheses developed from organizational sociology. The data gathered was the result of Kenney's ethnographic research with the extremist group. The analysed data included qualitative interviews, and secondary sources including newspaper reports and ethnographic fieldnotes. This thematic analysis approach allowed the research team to address how al-Muhajiroun members respond to governmental pressure and adapt both in terms of their operations and organisational make-up.

In their analysis of **deradicalization programs** in Indonesia, Milla et al. applied a quantitative version of thematic analysis for 89 interviews with terrorist detainees.<sup>24</sup> While closer to the traditional content analysis, this quantitative variation of thematic analysis allowed the researchers to identify that the adoption of alternative identities mediated a decline in support for jihad as war, thus predicting positive attitudes towards the deradicalization program.

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22 "Thematic Analysis: A Reflexive Approach," The University of Auckland, accessed July 23, 2020. <https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/thematic-analysis.html>.

23 Michael Kenney, John Horgan, Cale Horne, Peter Vining, Kathleen M. Carley, Michael W. Bigrigg, Mia Bloom, and Kurt Braddock, "Organisational Adaptation in an Activist Network: Social Networks, Leadership, and Change in al-Muhajiroun," *Applied Ergonomics* 44, no. 5 (2013): 739-47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apergo.2012.05.005>.

24 Mirra Noor Milla, Joevarian Hudiyan, and Haykal Hafizul Arifin, "Attitude Toward Rehabilitation as a Key Predictor for Adopting Alternative Identities in Deradicalization Programs: An Investigation of Terrorist Detainees' Profiles," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2020): 15-28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12380>.

# Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is a qualitative research technique, with theoretical backgrounds in phenomenology,<sup>25</sup> hermeneutics,<sup>26</sup> and idiography.<sup>27</sup> The predominant application of this approach is within health psychology.<sup>28</sup> When applied appropriately, IPA allows for researchers to gain insight into how interviewed individuals make sense of their social circumstances.<sup>29</sup>

IPA does not aim to achieve an objective record of the object or event under discussion.<sup>30</sup> Due to its phenomenological approach, it focuses on how the interviewee thinks and what they specifically deem to be important and relevant about a particular issue. Within terrorism studies, examples of the types of questions with which for which IPA would be useful for analyzing include, but are not excluded to:

- What does being involved in a terrorist group mean to individual members?
- In what way, if any, are individuals' identities affected through their involvement with a terrorist group?
- How do terrorists perceive the utility of violence?

These types of questions lend themselves to being analyzed using IPA because they necessitate an understanding of how those involved in terrorist groups interpret their own world. They are not seeking to obtain some form of objective truth.

Throughout the application of IPA is the understanding that during the analytical process the researcher plays an active role in a dynamic process.<sup>31</sup> Within IPA it is not pertinent that the interviewee is presenting a verifiable truth, what is most important is that they are discussing their own interpretation of specific topics and events.<sup>32</sup> As this approach is based on participants' interpretations of their lived experiences, it is most readily used when interviewees discuss important life events and experiences.<sup>33</sup> When con-

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25 The study of how people perceive themselves and their own lived experiences.

26 The methodology of interpretation, particularly concerned with the interpretation of texts.

27 Idiography refers to the study of the unique personal experiences of the individual and human nature. See, for example: Jonathan A. Smith and Virginia Eatough, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," in *Analyzing Qualitative Data in Psychology*, eds. Evanthia Lyons and Adrian Coyle (UK: SAGE, 2007), 35-64. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446207536>.

28 Jonathan A. Smith, "Beyond the Divide between Cognition and Discourse: Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Health Psychology," *Psychology & Health* 11, no. 2 (1996): 261-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870449608400256>.

29 John F. Morrison, *The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism: The Role and Impact of Organizational Splits* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

30 Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a Useful Methodology for Research on the Lived Experience of Pain," *British Journal of Pain* 9, no. 1 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2049463714541642>.

31 Ibid.

32 Jonathan A., Smith, Maria Jarman, and Mike Osborn, "Doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," in *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods*, eds. Michael Murray and Kerry Chamberlain (UK: SAGE, 1999), 218-40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446217870.n14>.

33 Jonathan A. Smith, *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (UK: SAGE, 2003).

sidering a topic such as radicalization, IPA is a particularly useful technique as it is designed to deal with ambiguous topics that are emotionally charged for the interviewee. IPA is, generally speaking, inductive in nature<sup>34</sup> and is most commonly used for small sample sizes. The IPA approach is still only sporadically applied within terrorism studies. Yet, we have in recent years seen some interesting research utilizing it.

## IPA in Research

In their **analysis of disengagement from paramilitary loyalism**, Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood used IPA in their analysis of eleven biographical-narrative interviews.<sup>35</sup> The analysis of these interviews with former paramilitaries through IPA allowed for them to identify the “complex interplay of external and internal factors involved in assisting or hindering disengagement from armed paramilitary groups,” alongside their commitment to building a peaceful future for Northern Ireland.<sup>36</sup> By using IPA the researchers were able to provide a comprehensive perspective of their participants’ interpretations of disengagement. However, they do emphasize that the application of IPA can only provide the researchers and readers with “a partial analytical account rather than a fully definitive account,”<sup>37</sup> thus not allowing for the results to be applicable to a broader generalized population.

## Grounded Theory

The purpose of grounded theory is to construct a theory “grounded” in data. The data must be systematically collected and analyzed to be deemed appropriate for use. By definition grounded theory is inductive in nature, as it is seeking to develop a theory rather than test one. Through the review of the data, which can include more than just the interview data, repeated concepts are identified and thus coded. During the analytical process of this approach the initial codes evolve and are grouped into broader concepts and categories as more data is collected, reviewed, and re-reviewed. These emerging categories then

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34 Katie Reid, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, “Exploring Lived Experience,” *The Psychologist* 18, no. 1 (2005): 20-23.

35 Neil Ferguson, Mark Burgess, and Ian Hollywood, “Leaving Violence Behind: Disengaging from Politically Motivated Violence in Northern Ireland,” *Political Psychology* 36, no. 2 (2015): 199-214. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12103>.

36 *Ibid*, 211.

37 *Ibid*, 212.

become the foundation for the new theory.<sup>38</sup> To date grounded theory has not been applied extensively within terrorism studies.

## Grounded Theory in Research

In her 2019 article, Dornschneider demonstrates the applicability of grounded theory to the **analysis of ethnographic interview transcripts**. In the analysis of interviews with 93 participants and non-participants in the Arab Spring in Morocco and Egypt, both open and axial coding was applied. The emerging theory was able to differentiate between participants and non-participants. The analysis showed the considerations of violent and non-violent activists focused on state violence and rational choice calculations. By contrast, non-violent activists considered a range of other factors including, but not excluded to, self-sacrifice and state negligence. In her concluding remarks Dornschneider emphasizes that the application of methods and analytical techniques such as grounded theory increases the analytical rigor of research, concurrently accentuating the transparency of our analysis.<sup>39</sup>

## TRIANGULATION: MEANINGS, PROCESSES, & PURPOSES

One of the great benefits of analyzing a public-facing topic like terrorism is that it provides us with the opportunity to triangulate data sources. Triangulation requires clarity on the purpose of the process. Triangulation is a term so common now in social science that its meaning and value can be misconstrued as universally accepted. Yet, a review of the literature demonstrates at least four distinct meanings, processes, and purposes:<sup>40</sup>

1. **Triangulation as validity checking:** by analyzing data from different sources that independently apply distinctive pressure on validity, it is possible to reduce the possibility of false conclusions.

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38 Kathy Charmaz and Linda Liska Belgrave, "Grounded Theory," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosg070.pub2>.

39 Stephanie Dornschneider, "Analyzing Ethnographic Interviews: Three Studies on Terrorism and Nonviolent Resistance," *International Political Science Review*, November 21, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0192512119884091>.

40 Manfred Max Bergman, "Troubles with Triangulation," in *Advances in Mixed Methods Research*, ed. Manfred Max Bergman (London: Sage, 2008). <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9780857024329>.

2. **Indefinite triangulation:** collecting a series of accounts on the same event from multiple people. Indefinite triangulation can demonstrate that these accounts were developed from different perspectives, be they physical, temporal, or biographical.<sup>41</sup>
3. **Triangulation as seeking complementary information:** utilizing different methods to analyze a specific topic. These different methods can provide a different understanding of the topic under investigation and thus provide a fuller understanding.
4. **Triangulation as epistemological dialogue or juxtaposition:** using and comparing different methods with fundamentally different perspectives on how the social world is constructed does not result in either validation or a more complete understanding. Instead, it can illustrate contrasting interpretations of the social world.<sup>42</sup>

Within terrorism research, and social science research in general,<sup>43</sup> the most common contemporary manifestation of triangulation is to seek complementary information. Nevertheless, there remains space for triangulation as a form of validity checking. We oftentimes have access to a wide variety of data-sources outside of our primary source interviews. This can be from the breadth of the interview data, event-related data, organizational publications, manifestos, social media activity, organizational financial information, survey data, or a variety of other data sources. However, this validity checking style of triangulation assumes that there is a single reality which can be identified and observed by using different sources and methods.<sup>44</sup>

If and when we are to use triangulation as a form of validity checking, we must again return to our original research question(s) and analytical techniques. Do they lend themselves to there being an objective truth as the answer(s)? Or would it be more accurate for there to be varying interpretations and influences? How we develop our research questions and view the knowledge to be gained from the data will in turn define how we approach and conceive the triangulation process. Therefore, when triangulating our data, methods, and/or sources we must always ask: to what end are we doing this? This reflection will provide a clearer understanding for the researcher, reader, and reviewer, as to the integrity and purpose of the overall methodological and analytical approaches.

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41 See: A. V. Cicourel, K. H. Jennings, S. H. Jennings, K. C. W. Leiter, R. MacKay, H. Mehan, and D. H. Roth, *Language Use and School Performance*. New York, NY: Academic Press, 1974.

42 Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (UK: Sage, 2018).

43 Bergman, "Troubles with Triangulation".

44 Ibid.

# ETHICS:

## ANALYTICAL INTEGRITY & RESEARCHER WELLBEING

When we discuss research ethics, we are more often than not referring to the data collection stage of research, and understandably so. We need to be constantly aware of the researchers' obligation to do no undue<sup>45</sup>harm to the participants, the researchers, or any other individuals either directly or indirectly linked to the research. This obligation does not end once the final interview or focus group has been completed. It continues into the analytical and dissemination stages of the research.

### Ethics & Analytical Integrity

Throughout this article there has been a call for analytical integrity—integrity, about what our data and analysis can and, at times more importantly, cannot tell us. This call for integrity has been presented as a means by which this field can become more academically credible. But it is more than that. It is also the ethical obligation of the researcher(s). Research in the area of terrorism studies has the potential of influencing domestic and foreign policies. We therefore have an ethical obligation not to over-interpret any findings and to stay true to the original data and within the limits of the analytical techniques. This necessitates an in-depth understanding of both the data and the analytical approach employed.

### Ethics & Researcher Wellbeing

Alongside this has to be a consideration for the well-being of the researcher. The topics covered in interviews in terrorism studies can be extremely upsetting and distressing. It is important to acknowledge the effect it can have on the researchers as well as the participants. This effect is most obvious at the point of carrying out the interview. However, these interviews can also be very distressing at the point of analysis. It is important for the researchers to consider how best to manage this, even developing a protocol to address these potential harms. The researcher has an ethical obligation to have these protocols in place for all of the members of their research team, especially for the most junior members of the team.

For the most harrowing interviews I have completed, I always consciously have a break, of even a few weeks, in between completing the interview and the beginning of transcription and analysis. The purpose for this is to provide myself with the opportunity to distance myself from the immediate emotional response to the original interview. This allows for greater analytical objectivity during the analysis. Ethics and the well-being of the researcher and participants has to be central to each stage of the research from planning to data collection, from analysis to dissemination.

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45 The qualifier of “undue” is included purposely. It is important to acknowledge that carrying out an interview on the subject of terrorism, whether as the interviewer or the interviewee, can be a distressing experience. It would therefore be too restrictive to have the assumption that no harm or distress will be caused through this form of research. However, the researcher has the ethical obligation to all involved that the distress caused is not excessive, and if it is, that appropriate support structures are in place.

# CONCLUSION

As a community of researchers, we have to constantly be considering how we can improve the quality, transparency, and replicability of our research. We have seen great progress made in recent years in relation to primary-source research,<sup>46</sup> including the gradual increase in first-hand interviews. However, this increase in primary source interviews has not been accompanied with a transparency in analytical approaches.<sup>47</sup> If we are to develop as a field of study, we need to be producing research that is transparent in methodological and analytical approaches. Without analytical transparency and rigor, we leave ourselves open to criticism and the value of our research and its findings being questioned both within and outside of academia. Transparency of approach provides us with the opportunity to show off all the great work we have done. It should therefore not be shied away from; it should be embraced as it can result in the greater respect for our work.

This chapter has attempted to present the reader with a variety of considerations when approaching interview analysis. Primary source interviews are predominantly analyzed via qualitative approaches. However, that should not be seen as synonymous with minimizing analytical rigor as compared to quantitative analysis. The form that this rigor takes is different when comparing the two families of approaches. But this difference should not be considered as a value judgement. On the contrary, rigorous qualitative analysis is just as important and at times more analytically demanding than the equivalent quantitative analysis. The depth of understanding to be gained from well-designed qualitative analysis can provide us with invaluable insight into terrorist experiences and decision making. We must always strive to approach both our methodology and analysis in ethical ways. Not only does this help protect the researcher and participant(s) from any undue harm, it also allows us to have greater confidence in the analytical interpretation of the data.

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46 Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016."

47 Harris, "Reporting Practices."

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