Chapter 21
Researching Extremists and Terrorists: Reflections on Interviewing Hard-to-Reach Populations

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1 Introduction

As one of the twenty-first century's defining security concerns, the perpetration of terrorist violence has drawn unprecedented levels of attention from scholars. Between al-Qaeda's 2001 attacks on the United States, the 'Global War on Terrorism' that followed, the rise of the so-called Islamic State and recent, growing, concerns over right-wing extremist violence, the study of terrorism is constantly evolving. However, the precipitous rise in terrorism-related research has unfolded in tandem with concern and critique as to the overall quality of the work being done (Lum et al., 2006; Schuurman, 2020; Silke, 2001). One of these concerns has been the inability, or hesitancy, of researchers to engage directly with their objects of study: those whose thoughts, feelings, or actions typify them as 'extremist'. Undoubtedly, this reluctance has been rooted, at least in part, in practicality. Extremism and terrorism are controversial and politicised subjects and gaining access to individuals who fit these monikers presents numerous logistical and ethical challenges. This chapter provides some background on the use of field research in this area and shares the authors' experiences of applying some of these techniques in gathering primary data. It is hoped that these sections will be a resource for other researchers exploring the phenomena of radicalisation, extremism, and terrorism and that our experiences will offer some insights into what it is like to gather data in this unique field of study.

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1.1 Definition of the Phenomenon or Population

One of the most challenging aspects of approaching this type of research is that of defining and operationalising key concepts. Since its earliest iterations, *terrorism* has proven a notoriously difficult phenomenon to define. Being both vague and imbued with explicit, negative connotations, the term has resisted attempts to reach a broad, definitional consensus (Richards, 2019). Within the research projects referred to here, we have tried to apply definitions which capture both the nature and nuance of the phenomenon. In this contribution, we use Schmid's (2011) 'Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism', operationalising terrorism as 'a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action' which unfolds without legal or moral restraints, usually targeted at civilians and non-combatants, performed for its 'propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties' (p. 86). Terrorism, in other words, uses the gruesome spectacle of death and injury to grab the attention of diverse audiences, coercing and intimidating opponents while attempting to inspire potential followers. Schmid's definition lays bare the key mechanism of terrorism (i.e. audience manipulation) and is applicable to state as well as non-state actors. This, in turn, affords it a greater degree of objectivity than some legal or governmental definitions.

Another definitional point of departure is that we see involvement in terrorism as only one of several possible outcomes resulting from the complex process of *radicalisation*. Another laden term, radicalisation is broadly seen as having cognitive and behavioural dimensions (Khalil et al., 2022). Most people who become sympathetic to the notion of terrorism and other forms of political violence as means for societal change do not engage in it themselves. Moreover, just as cognitive radicalisation can be seen as encompassing different *degrees* of support for terrorism (e.g. from general sympathy to the conviction it is a personal duty), so too can behavioural radicalisation consist of more outcomes than terrorist violence alone (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). In fact, most people who radicalise will enact their views in a variety of legal and illegal ways that fall (just) short of the threshold to terrorist attacks, such as spreading propaganda or engaging in hate crimes.

Although this heterogeneity is broadly represented in the current chapter, the populations we refer to do share one common characteristic: all are described as having 'radicalised to extremism'. In other words, all, have *in principle*, come to support the use of terrorism and other forms of political violence in pursuit of revolutionary aims. We thus purposefully exclude from our assessments those who might, more accurately, be, labelled as 'radicals'. While extremism is a frame of mind that tends to seek broad revolutionary change, explicitly requiring and advocating the destruction of the existing order, radicalism tends to prefer non-violent means in pursuit of more limited ends that can usually be accommodated within the existing socio-political system (Bötticher, 2017). While, statistically, the likelihood of an 'extremist' becoming involved in terrorism remains small (Neumann, 2013), it is, nonetheless, more plausible than it would be for a 'radical'; ascertaining this

degree of cognitive radicalisation was, therefore, an important inclusion criterion for the studies we reflect on here.

2 Phases of Fieldwork

The discussion of our fieldwork experiences draws from three independent research projects conducted between 2012 and 2022. Two of these are the authors' doctoral studies. One focused on understanding how and why individuals become involved in the Dutch homegrown jihadist 'Hofstadgroup'. This was an early example of a 'homegrown' jihadist group that became infamous after one of its participants murdered filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 (Schuurman, 2018). The other PhD study dealt with how extremist narratives could be challenged (Carthy, 2020). The third, and most recent, project to which our discussion relates is a multi-year and multi-region study on why most individuals who radicalise do not actually become involved in terrorist violence (see Schuurman, 2020; Schuurman & Carthy, 2023a, b, c). Across these projects, interviewing is the principal fieldwork technique.

2.1 Project 1: Studying Dutch Homegrown Jihadists

The PhD project on the Hofstadgroup sought to reconstruct how and why its participants had radicalised. The idea for the project came from a study that Schuurman and a colleague were conducting on behalf of the Dutch National Police in 2011, which provided them with access to investigative files on the Hofstadgroup (Schuurman & Eijkman, 2015). At more than ten thousand pages of suspect and witness interviews, descriptions of evidence collected during house searches, wiretap transcripts et cetera, the police files seemed like a 'treasure trove' for addressing some of the field's longstanding concerns about a lack of primary data (Schuurman, 2020). Hoping to utilise the potential of this material for his nascent PhD project, Schuurman followed standard Dutch practice for requesting access to police information for research purposes by submitting a formal written request to use the files for this purpose to the Dutch Public Prosecution Service (*Openbaar Ministerie*). It was granted in 2012. Given the privacy-sensitive nature of the files, strict anonymisation was one of the terms of use, meaning that none of the Hofstadgroup's participants are referred to by name in the PhD manuscript and related publications.

Once the allure of access to large quantities of privileged information (Bosma et al., 2020) had worn off, it also became apparent that the very specific purpose for which the files had been put together (namely, to enable criminal prosecution) required broadening the project's empirical foundations. To provide a counterpoint to an essentially governmental perspective on the group, Schuurman relied on

academic publications and media reporting and tried to obtain interviews with former participants. Having no previous experience with conducting interviews, let alone with hard-to-reach populations like (former) jihadists, this turned out to be a time-consuming yet ultimately worthwhile process. At $N = 5$, the number of former Hofstadgroup members interviewed was relatively small, yet their insights were essential, especially for illuminating internal group dynamics.

All data, whether primary or secondary, were analysed using a theoretical framework that incorporated structural, group, and individual-level explanations for involvement in terrorism. The results indicated that what initiated radicalisation processes was often different from what kept people involved in the Hofstadgroup. What it meant to be 'involved' in the group also took a variety of forms, ranging from some participants who simply enjoyed spending time with like-minded individuals to others who were highly committed to the violent pursuit of ideological goals. Other key findings included the absence of serious mental illness as an explanation for the group's planned and executed acts of terrorism, as well as the escalatory dynamics stemming from hard-core participants' increasingly antagonistic relations with the Dutch justice system. The project also noted the somewhat unsatisfying but still highly relevant influence of chance in bringing about involvement in this group (Schuurman, 2018).

2.2 Project 2. Exploring Narratives of Violent Extremism

The PhD project on countering extremist narratives emerged in response to a number of open calls for more theoretically informed methodologies to inform the development of strategies to 'counter' problematic, dominant narratives in the context of terrorism (i.e. counter-narratives, see Carthy, Doody, Cox, O'Hora & Sarma, 2020). Fieldwork for this project consisted of interviews with ten perpetrators of violent extremism across a spectrum of extremist contexts, including the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Mujahideen in Bosnia and Chechnya, al-Qaeda, and various white supremacist movements across North America. With an epistemological grounding in social constructionism, the aim of the fieldwork was to better understand the 'content' that a counter-narrative would be designed to counter. The first objective was to determine how individual and broader 'template' narratives of perpetration were constructed, guided by the question: 'How do perpetrators explain, in story-like format, how they became involved in violent extremism?' The second objective was to identify how violence, as opposed to non-violence, was depicted as an instrumental course of action.

Participants were recruited through networks of 'formers'[1] and interviewed for 50 to 100 minutes, both in-person and online. The interview schedule was designed to encourage participants to recall moments in their lives when they legitimised violent extremism, while also encouraging narrativisation or 'storied' responses to particular prompts (Mishler, 1986, p. 233). To achieve this, Carthy delivered specific sets of prompt questions at relevant intervals to identify the story's protagonists ('Who would you like to hear your reasoning?') and antagonists ('Who would you *not* like to hear your reasoning?') as well as the function ('How is this story helpful/dangerous?') of participants' stories (see Smith, 2015). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, but the transcriptions did not contain participants' names or any identifiable details. The data then underwent a three-stage procedure of familiarisation, coding, and analysis. The coded data were analysed using narrative analysis and clustered using a sociolinguistic syntax called Labovian Syntax (Labov, 1972, 2003).

It is important to note that this type of analysis does not place limits on the number of narratives that an individual can produce. On complex phenomena such as the perpetration of violence, an individual may have several, compacted stories, often interwoven to magnify particular feelings or meanings. For one participant, for example, Carthy identified four narratives legitimising the terrorist violence perpetrated by al-Qaeda, some rooted in the participant's upbringing and early adulthood, some as recounted to them by others. In order to craft a compelling argument for attacks such as those of 11 September 2001, it was necessary for this participant to draw from a diverse arsenal of compelling stories.

Altogether, 32 'individual' narratives were identified across ten interviews. The narratives contained several 'techniques' that helped legitimise violence, including depicting terrorist violence as reactionary and attributing indefensible positions to the target (e.g., explaining that their antagonist would "shoot [them] dead" in the absence of an equally violent response) in order to damage their character or credibility. While fallacious at times, a key observation by Carthy was that the narratives, nonetheless, reflected a great deal of rational logic, particularly with regard to orientation details (i.e. people, places, and times) which contextualised participants' involvement in extremism. In this way, the findings supported the notion of a quasi-rational narrative of violent extremism; one in which the protagonist is portrayed with a great deal of complexity, while the antagonist is oversimplified.

[1] Here, 'former' refers to an individual who has left extremism behind. It is important to note that a small number of participants objected to the label 'former', arguing that such terminology impeded a true understanding of their lived experience. Their *anomie* with political structures, they explained, did not exist solely in the past, nor did they consider their thought-patterns to have dramatically transformed to the point of classifying them as a 'former' anything. This is a complex idea, and one that, unfortunately, cannot be unpacked within the scope of the current chapter. Suffice to say that we apply the term 'former' loosely, conscious that it is not a perfect description of participants in Project 2.

2.3 Project 3. Understanding Non-involvement in Terrorist Violence

The final piece of fieldwork included in this chapter was part of a multi-year and multi-region project undertaken by both authors on non-involvement in terrorist violence. The objective of this project was to create a dataset of individuals who have radicalised to extremism, specifically including those who did not become terrorists. In practice, this meant gathering data on an elusive sub-set of an already hard-to-reach population; those who endorse terrorist violence but don't become involved in it themselves. Using the definitions provided in Sect. 1.1, we gathered data on 206 individuals, half of whom were 'involved' in terrorist violence, half who remained 'non-involved' throughout their entire radicalisation trajectories. All cases were at the end of their involvement trajectory (i.e. no longer active), and we focused on Salafi-Jihadists as well as right-wing extremists, considering these ideologies to represent the fulcrum of the contemporary, terrorist threat. We included cases from 13 countries across Europe and North America: the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Austria, Denmark, Australia, and Switzerland.

It is important to note that, due to travel restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not rely on the type of fieldwork we had originally envisioned. For instance, it was no longer possible to follow the examples of other researchers and attend court cases, demonstrations, or use spaces in the community as starting points for identifying potential interviewees (Buijs et al., 2006; Groen & Kranenberg, 2010; Hemmingsen, 2011). In terms of data, we had to rely on the available academic literature, media accounts, any available legal documentation, access to police investigative files granted for some of the Dutch cases (n = 19), autobiographical accounts (n = 56), and, where possible, semi-structured interviews conducted remotely (n = 37). It is these interviews which will form the basis of our fieldwork discussion on this project. The data for this project were analysed quantitatively as part of an extensive 159-item codebook on structural-, group-, and individual-level factors associated with terrorism involvement (Schuurman & Carthy, 2023a, b, c).

3 Techniques Employed

Over the past two decades, several scholars have offered reflections on conducting fieldwork on extremism and terrorism, noting the emotional demands (McGowan, 2020; Orsini, 2013; Woon, 2013), the degree of personal risk (Ranstorp, 2007; Schmidt, 2021), as well as novel, ethical dilemmas which may be faced (Grossman & Gerrand, 2021). Others have remarked that these considerations are frequently raised by universities' ethics and safety committees, even to the point of impeding ethical approval for the research itself (Sluka, 2020; Youngman, 2020). Our

reflection on our own fieldwork experiences touches on some of these issues, but is primarily a personal account of the process, challenges, and benefits of interviewing extremists and terrorists whose radicalisation trajectories have—in most cases—ended. We will begin by discussing the techniques we employed to gain access to our research subjects as well conduct effective interviews. We then discuss the challenges we encountered; from writing ethics applications and convincing interviewees to speak with us, to more emotionally and ethically taxing issues such as (instrumentally) empathising with people who have used violence, determining how much of 'ourselves' to disclose in interviews, and considering whether or not to financially incentivise participation in research.

3.1 Gaining Access

3.1.1 The Use of Gatekeepers

Snowball sampling, or 'chain referral', is a common method of sampling hard-to-reach populations. This technique relies on a series of referrals to potential interviewees by others who may have experienced or have experience with the phenomenon of interest. Because the chain-referral technique introduces a sampling bias (i.e. the probability of a participant being included in the sample is not equivalent for all those who share similar characteristics), it is best described as a method of non-probability sampling. However, while this approach to sampling is widely adopted in qualitative research, it is not without its challenges. Carthy recalls using, with little success, chain referral in Project 2 to gain access to a former foreign fighter who had recently returned from Syria. Despite an acquaintance making the initial connection through e-mail, neither the acquaintance nor the referee knew each other in any formal capacity. While the referee initially agreed to an interview, shortly before the interview was due to take place, the referee disclosed that they were not comfortable speaking about their experience and would prefer to cancel.

Carthy reflected on this encounter, regretting, principally, that an individual who was not comfortable speaking about their experience was sampled. The logic of the chain referral is to avoid directly approaching potential interviewees (see Sect. 3.1.2) but, through misinterpretation of the relationship between the referrer and the referee, the outcome, in this instance, was comparable. For this reason, it is important to consider the relationship between referrer and referee, and this is where well-positioned gatekeepers can be crucial.

Not only do gatekeepers provide access to remote or furtive settings (e.g. extremist milieus or services accessed by formers), but their connection to such settings allows for the formation of inclusion and exclusion criteria in terms of sample selection. Although this is still a form of non-probability sampling, the strategy is no longer snowballing but *purposive*. In other words, even though the sampling is based on individual connections or 'chains', the chains in the chain referral are

carefully selected and established to create a more representative sample (Penrod et al., 2003) and, importantly, a level of sensitivity on the part of the referrer.

It is important to remember that this is a population of individuals who would not ordinarily participate in research. Without the help of an intermediary who is familiar with research, the intention of the researcher may appear cryptic and the differences between a researcher and, for example, a reporter may not be immediately obvious.[2] When gatekeepers were used in Projects 2 and 3, Carthy keenly observed that interviewees' willingness to participate was borne almost exclusively out of loyalty and generosity to their respective gatekeeper.

Reflecting on our own fieldwork, we have, where possible, tried to incorporate gatekeepers who operate in a formal capacity to counter or prevent violent extremism (P/CVE). From practitioners involved in 'Exit' programmes to those in probation services conducting reintegration work, these types of gatekeepers have played a vital role in reassuring potentially apprehensive participants as to our intentions. For Carthy, gaining access to former members of the Provisional IRA (PIRA), for instance, would not have been possible without the support of a gatekeeper who was also a member of the PIRA and now worked in education and advocacy. This connection was made gradually. A researcher and colleague who knew the gatekeeper made the initial introduction over e-mail. What followed was an e-mail exchange and a phone call before the gatekeeper agreed to provide access to a sample of former prisoners in Northern Ireland. Carthy has since introduced this gatekeeper to another researcher who has gained access in a similar way.

However, that is not to say that incorporating gatekeepers is without its challenges. Schuurman, for instance, faced difficulties getting *past* gatekeepers when he was working on his PhD. His experiences in this regard relate to requests to Dutch probation service staff and municipal employees to facilitate access to (former) extremists, including both those still in prison and others already released on parole. In several conversations held intermittently across a number of years, these professionals were gracious with their time and usually empathised with the researcher's request. However, actual interviews never materialised from this approach, usually related to (wholly understandable) concerns over how the interviewee might react to someone asking them to dig through recollections of their extremist past.

3.1.2 Directly Approaching Potential Interviewees

Depending on the particulars of the research project, directly approaching potential interviewees may be a viable alternative, or complement, to using gatekeepers. It is important to note, however, that this sampling approach is distinct from 'cold-calling' (a methodological approach which has received mixed appraisal, see Drabble et al. (2016)), in that it is not intended as a data collection tool. In our own

[2] Indeed, even with the best of intentions, researchers in this line of research have, in the past, let participants down (see Sect. 4.5), and created trepidation when it comes to research participation.

work, we have used this technique to make initial contact with potential interviewees, with the hope of organising a formal interview at another time. With this approach, however, there are some things to consider.

First, it is important to establish whether a potential interviewee is still active in an extremist milieu. Compared to interviewing formers, approaching an individual who is still aligned with an extremist belief system represents a markedly different dynamic; one which we, as researchers, have generally avoided. Safety concerns aside, we have come to think that interviewees may be more able to objectively reflect on their radicalisation process once it has ceased, although retrospective accounts do increase the risk of post hoc rationalisations (Freilich & LaFree, 2016). This is not to say that collecting data on active extremists or terrorists is not a fruitful pursuit; however, it may present additional challenges when interpreting the reliability of the material so gained.

Second, it is important to establish whether a potential interviewee's involvement in extremism is sufficiently in the past and, if not, how that may emotionally affect them. It goes without saying that the risk of emotional distress is heightened as interviewees recount particularly traumatic periods in their lives, and the lives of those around them. When potential interviewees can look back on an involvement in extremism that was years ago, they are not only more likely to be able to reflect with some critical distance,[3] but are also less likely to have legal proceedings or prison sentences hanging over them.

Finally, before approaching an individual directly, it is important to determine whether they have a public profile that invites the opening of communication. In the example provided at the beginning of Sect. 3.1.1, the referee was not in the public eye, nor had they ever spoken openly about their experience. If individuals have written books about their experiences, or are involved in Exit-work, they may be more willing to participate in research. They are also more likely to have publicly listed e-mail addresses, social media accounts, or publishers that can be used as intermediaries. For former right-wing extremists active in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, direct approaches along these lines have turned out to be very fruitful. We believe that this may be rooted in the time that has elapsed since their involvement. As jihadism in Europe and North America is generally a far more recent phenomenon, direct approaches to reaching this population have been far less effective in our experiences.

3.1.3 Accessing Public Prosecution Service Files

Though stretching the limits of what could be considered fieldwork, accessing 'official' data sources on extremism and terrorism (in this case, files put together by the Dutch public prosecution service) is another technique which can be used to gather

[3] It is important to note, however, that interviewing individuals who have spent a great deal of time reflecting on their experiences is not without its challenges. This is discussed in more detail in Sect. 3.2.3.

information on radicalised individuals. However, this approach has its own set of access-related challenges. At least in the Dutch context, one challenge has been the wait time associated with processing access requests. For both Schuurman's PhD and the more recent project on non-involvement in terrorist violence, as well as several smaller studies undertaken in-between, access requests took around three months to be granted. This makes using such material really only feasible for longer-term projects. If granted, access to this material is limited to the applicant and all data drawn from the files has to be strictly anonymised. While neither of these requirements are difficult to accommodate in a practical sense, they do raise a larger issue to do with transparency. Namely, that other scholars are essentially unable to verify claims made on the basis of privileged access to sensitive sources. This limitation is discussed in more detail in Sect. 4.5.

3.1.4 Language Considerations

As alluded to in an earlier section, navigating language in this field of research can be difficult. In the absence of agreed-upon definitions of many of our central concepts, there is always a risk that certain words or phrases will resonate with some individuals while causing offence to others. When approaching a gatekeeper, for instance, it is important to understand their personal stance on the thoughts or actions of their affiliates and appreciate that many will not comprehensively condemn them. In her fieldwork, Carthy observed that terms such as 'terrorism', 'violent extremism', or 'formers' caused offence, whereas terms such as 'indiscriminate violence against civilians', 'violence against a perceived outgroup', or 'those who are no longer associated with [particular movement]' were less provocative. Exercising caution and distilling concepts down to indisputable actions or behaviours is less likely to create backlash.

However, being careful with language should not veer too much into legalese. An area in which overly technical language can be a barrier is in the initial communication sent to the potential interviewee. During his PhD project, Schuurman tried to accompany his initial request for a meeting with a list of formal steps taken to protect interviewee privacy and safety. While well-intentioned, the verbose and formal messages that resulted appeared to have put off at least a number of potential interviewees. For the most recent project described in this chapter, Schuurman relied instead on brief initial notes that simply said what he was working on and whether the person in question would be willing to have a brief introductory phone or Skype call. This appears to have been a far more successful approach. Once contact had been established, and the importance of informed consent explained, the technically worded consent form was, usually, no longer a hurdle.

3.2 The Interview Format

The following sections will detail some techniques we have used to conduct effective remote and face-to-face interviews with former extremists and terrorists.

3.2.1 Managing Expectations

A potential ethical issue when interviewing individuals about violent extremist experiences (even if those lie in the past) is offering a false impression of the researcher being able to improve the interviewee's personal situation. Dolnik (2011, p. 11) provides the example of individuals asking for direct favours such as 'public exposition of their suffering (…) material compensation [or] assistance in immigration issues'. As well as putting the researcher in an uncomfortable position, this may lead to the participant feeling taken advantage of if they are not assisted. In our own fieldwork, we found it beneficial to open the interview with a statement to the effect that, 'although the project cannot benefit you personally, the knowledge gained will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the problem'. In this way, the participants' expectations could be managed, and the interview could continue without reservation.

3.2.2 Establishing Rapport

Establishing initial contact with potential interviewees and managing expectations are important first steps towards conducting interview-based fieldwork. Yet, they do not guarantee that the actual interview will yield in-depth and detailed information or that the research question(s) will be addressed effectively. This is especially the case when the research question(s) relate to deviant forms of behaviour such as terrorism. To increase the likelihood that an interview will bear fruit, we have often found it necessary to start by establishing personal rapport.

Here, rapport broadly refers to the establishment of an interpersonal connection based on a degree of empathy and interest in the other, not just as a potential source of information, but as a human being. Verbal techniques for establishing rapport may include using the interviewee's first name or asking open-ended questions unrelated to the topic of the interview. Non-verbal rapport-building tools can include using eye-contact, animated facial expressions, and reassuring tones of voice (Duggan, 2001). In her own fieldwork, Carthy has relied on a number of rapport-building techniques, some of which differ across interview settings.

For in-person interviews, Carthy chose to conduct her interviews in locations familiar to the interviewee. For remote interviews, however, Carthy placed special emphasis on allowing the interviewee to select the time and date of the interview. While this sometimes meant that interviews were conducted at unsocial hours, it also meant that interviewees were in a familiar rhythm, creating the necessary

conditions for rapport. For example, Carthy recalls connecting with a former white supremacist who was a self-described 'night-owl' and preferred working in the middle of the night. In both instances, the goal was to reduce the likelihood that the environment would pose a distraction, decreasing cognitive load and allowing the interviewee to 'settle in' to the interview.

In the early stages of an interview, small habits like thanking the interviewee for their time, sharing any trepidation, and spending time speaking about unrelated topics all helped establish a connection and overcome a sense of detachment (see also: Post & Berko, 2009). To maintain rapport during the interview, both Carthy and Schuurman found it effective to explicitly acknowledge that they, the researchers, were being trusted with personal information and to emphasise the value they placed on it. Oftentimes, there is no reward or clear incentive for participation in research on extremism and terrorism (this is discussed in more detail in Sect. 4.4) and, for this reason, it is critical that the value of the interview is explicitly communicated. Though simply 'having a chat' is often key to establishing rapport, we chose to move onto semi-structured formats for the substantive part of our interviews. While we wanted to put our interviewees at ease, we also wanted to gather information in a coherent fashion. Establishing rapport first and then drawing on a semi-structured format often allowed us to do both.

It is important to iterate that rapport is not only useful in conducting a substantive interview. In our experience, it has also facilitated informed consent and gave us more freedom in recording the subsequent conversation. Once small talk had established a degree of trust between interviewer and interviewee, the more formal issues surrounding informed consent and whether the interview would be recorded, were generally easier to tackle.

3.2.3 Overcoming 'Rehearsed' Responses

It is commonplace for former extremists and terrorists to share their experiences with each other, as well as with broader audiences, as part of so-called 'Exit' work intended to help others navigate their departure from extremism. During Project 3, Carthy observed that former extremists drew considerable support from meetings with others who had similarly distanced themselves from their erstwhile extremist convictions and associated social networks. However, the interconnectedness of this community can also have some undesirable implications for fieldwork; namely, it can lead to a 'cross-contamination' of stories, whereby the underlying mechanisms underpinning certain thoughts, feelings, or behaviours become oversimplified to line up with an established narrative. Simply put, the stories can start to sound similar.

Carthy recalls listening to an interview with a white nationalist who she had interviewed some years earlier and noting how, over the years, their involvement story had become condensed into a soundbite ('identity, meaning, looking for answers'). Having told their story so often, the interviewee had come up with a quick way of communicating it but, as a result, had compromised its distinctiveness.

In many ways, this observation is not surprising. Human beings naturally draw upon key moments in their lives in a story-like format and, overtime, giving rehearsed responses can become unavoidable. This allows them, as the narrator, to place meaning on otherwise isolated events (Kirkman, 2002, p. 33), something radicalised individuals ostensibly seek (Kruglanski et al., 2013). Unfortunately, this can also interfere with the reliability of the information gathered during an interview.

As pointed out by Dolnik (2013), no interviewer wants to walk away from an interview 'with only what the terrorist wants to project' (p. 47) and, fortunately, certain types of analysis offer practical workarounds when responses start to become rehearsed. As mentioned in Sect. 2.2, structural narrative analysis (Smith, 2015, p. 218), for instance, provides a mechanism for overcoming somewhat flat answers by using circulation ('Who would you like to hear/not hear your reasoning?'), connection ('Who does this reasoning connect you to?'), and function questions ('How is this story helpful/dangerous?'). By being aware of these tendencies and introducing novelty using interview templates, there is a great deal of potential for original, thoughtful content from interviews with former extremists and terrorists.

4 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

In the following sections, we reflect on some of the ethical and emotional aspects of conducting interviews with (former) extremists and terrorists, including balancing risk versus reward, engaging with research ethics committees, and managing the interview dynamic.

4.1 Risk Versus Reward

In any empirical investigation in which the object of study is disproportionately at risk of 'harm or wrong' (i.e. vulnerable), the onus is on the researcher to consider and determine that the risks and benefits are appropriately balanced (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017, p. 2). Even before gaining access to our sample(s), we were conscious that in most Western countries, radicalised individuals are a small and difficult-to-reach population. Indeed, compared to other areas of research on violence or physical harm-related topics, such as homicide or road-traffic accidents (Nemeth & Mauslein, 2019; Ruby, 2002), the actual incidence, while difficult to gauge, is likely not as widespread as one would think. Within this relatively small population, those individuals who are willing to speak to researchers about their experiences are even less common (Horgan, 2012).

For this reason, one of the most important considerations before entering the field is to understand that opportunities to speak with (formerly) radicalised individuals are infrequent and should not be misused, either through inexperience or through the application of poor methodologies. An individual who Carthy

interviewed as part of Project 2 spoke openly, some years later, about their feelings of exploitation at the hands of researchers who were more interested in treating the individual like an information resource than as a human being. Although the interviewee did not display similar unease during the interview with Carthy, their point is an important one. Oftentimes, contributing to knowledge is the only immediate benefit *of* participation; if fieldwork is premature, forced, or lacking direction, this will decrease the benefit to the participant and tip the balance towards risk.

4.2 Research Ethics Committees

For any research project which involves human subjects and, by extension, ethical approval by a university ethics committee, the researcher must demonstrate two things: first, that the data-gathering approach employed is *necessary* and second, that any *predictable risk* to either the research participant or the researcher is, by design, minimised. While it is not often difficult to communicate the value of research on extremism and terrorism to an ethics committee, convincing them that such a pursuit presents minimal risks is more challenging. That being said, by emphasising the following points, neither Carthy nor Schuurman have ever had a project rejected by an ethics committee, despite some initial trepidation.

First and foremost, it was crucial that the committee understood that the research participants, by design, could not pose a threat to the researcher. This was done by emphasising that individuals who were still radicalised could not be sampled (i.e. a sampling criterion was that interviewees were 'formers') and that the interviews would be conducted in public places (e.g. a café, a room at university) or online.

Second, it was important to demonstrate that attention had been paid to the safety and welfare of the participant(s). Across all projects, both authors were required to produce information sheets about the projects (and the purpose of the interviews) to disseminate to potential participants, as well as consent forms. Especially in Schuurman's experience, many interviewees remained hesitant to sign their names on a consent form or to have the interview recorded. To accommodate this, Schuurman would send signed consent forms to the interviewee, thereby making sure that they at the very least had his signed promise to protect their privacy and security in a number of ways. He also relied on copious amounts of hand-written notes which, while certainly less ideal than an audio recording, did serve to record key details while also being less of a stressor to the interviewee than a recording device.

If interviews were to be recorded, participants were required, during the recording, to restate that they consented to the recording and that they understood that the recording would be transcribed, and any identifiable details removed. To protect participants' identities, the recordings were deleted upon transcription, interviewees were given a pseudonym, and they were sent a copy of any transcripts or recordings to maximise transparency. Crucially, no information that could be used to identify the interviewee would ever make it into a publication (e.g. no names, dates of birth or specific details of offences committed).

Furthermore, Carthy found that the ethics committee at her university were reassured by a great deal of operational detail. For in-person interviews, this included preparing a 'safety protocol' which outlined the conditions under which an in-person interview would take place, including locations and, in the case of Project 2, the role of the supervisor in confirming times and locations and, after the interview, debriefing. A protocol for participant distress may also be necessary, depending on the scope of the interview. Finally, both Carthy and Schuurman have found it beneficial to use encryption software (e.g., VeraCrypt) to store transcripts and any unprocessed audio recordings to ensure that loss or theft of the data carrier will not risk impinging on interviewees' privacy or safety.

4.3 Unwittingly Validating Others' Views

As mentioned, a key criterion for inclusion in Carthy's research was that participants were no longer radicalised. However, despite establishing this criterion prior to the interview, she noted how several participants continued to espouse xenophobic views towards certain communities despite having renounced their extremist beliefs and behavioural intentions more broadly. As part of Project 2, Carthy spoke with a former bomb-maker who explained that while they renounced terrorism 'today', they regretted nothing about their past involvement. Indeed, in line with the literature on de-radicalisation, a clear differentiation exists between the renunciation of particular beliefs and behavioural disengagement from extremist groups or violent behaviour (see Della Porta & LaFree, 2012). People may 'disengage' behaviourally, while not 'deradicalising' cognitively (i.e. even so-called formers may continue to hold (some) views that an interviewee may consider extremist). For this reason, it is not surprising that some participants continued to retain polarising views, nor were these views necessarily extraneous to the research aims and objectives.

As outlined in earlier sections, the objective of Carthy's research in Project 2 was to identify and understand the means and mechanisms by which violence against perceived outgroups could be justified. In fact, it was integral to the project that participants' accounts reflected their genuine, candid reasoning at the time. Any perception by the interviewee of judgement or rebuke on the part of the interviewer could jeopardise this objective and impede frank disclosure. However, an ethical issue which can arise from this dynamic (and, indeed, any effort to build rapport with extremists or terrorists) is that of seeming to 'legitimise' or validate extremist thoughts or actions. This was a challenge that both Carthy and Schuurman encountered across all of the projects referred to in this chapter.

To address this issue, Dolnik (2011) suggests that interviewers should avoid actively contributing their own view unless expressly asked. Unfortunately, this is not always possible, and Carthy recalls several incidents in which she was asked to 'weigh in' on complex themes. In such cases, an approach used by Dolnik (who attributes its use to hostage negotiators) is to find empathetic ways of validating the grievances behind specific actions while carefully distancing those grievances from

subsequent actions (2011, p. 12). For example, when asked by a former Mujahideen fighter in Bosnia and Chechnya what she would do if her community were being unfairly treated and targeted, Carthy legitimised the interviewee's grievance ('that must have been a frightening situation for you and your family') but did not connect the grievance to particular actions ('it is impossible for me to put myself in that position or say what I would have done'). While evasive answers are not always optimal, this differentiation between grievances and actions makes it more difficult for the dynamic to be misconstrued as legitimising violence.

There is also the possibility that an interviewee will try to rattle the interviewer, perhaps in an attempt to get them to show their 'true colours' or simply because it amuses them. Allowing provocations to hit home and trigger a fierce rebuttal can jeopardise the interview. At the same time, however, letting grievous statements simply slide can lead to discomfort about seeming to legitimise extremist views by not challenging them. Schuurman recalls a situation in which an interviewee appeared to be trying to get under his skin by telling him, within a few minutes of the conversation's start, that the government had for years been trying to determine whom he had had sex with. Noticing that this strange and, in actuality rather more strongly worded, anecdote did not elicit much response, the interviewee seemed to escalate to more ideologically provocative statements, largely about how Nazi Germany's operation on the Eastern Front during World War 2 had been for the benefit of mankind. Not rising to the bait allowed Schuurman to get to the actual questions, but the entire conversation did leave him feeling slightly tarnished for not having spoken up in defence of the millions murdered by the Nazi regime.

4.4 Revealing Information About Yourself

While validating inappropriate views should be avoided in any interview dynamic, the question remains, to what extent should the researcher share *any* personal thoughts or feelings with an interviewee? In their research with rape survivors, Campbell et al. (2010, p. 62) stress the importance of equalising the power imbalance by letting participants see into the 'world' of the researcher. Mutual disclosure, they argue, can break down barriers to 'real conversation' (p. 74) and allow for those genuine experiences to be accessed. Although it would be remiss to compare those who have espoused extremist views with victims of sexual assault, one point of comparison between these populations may be their cultural and social isolation, leading them to seek reassurance as to whether their experience is 'normal'. In other areas of fieldwork with similarly isolated populations, such as those who have suffered pregnancy loss (Andalibi et al., 2018) or LGBT+ communities (Jowett et al., 2011), mutual disclosure has been described as a critical mechanism for establishing empathy, trust, and rapport. Indeed, when interviewing former political prisoners in Northern Ireland as part of Project 2, Carthy recalls drawing on her Catholic upbringing to connect with participants' narratives of culture and identity. Although she had little to disclose in terms of personal victimisation, she found that her

willingness to relate to participants' religious identity allowed for greater depth of discussion on certain topics.

However, revealing information about oneself can also be problematic. As part of an interview for Project 3, Carthy did not wish to disclose, when asked, her parents' occupations. She found the question unnecessary and probing, particularly as it was asked in the context of social class. In this particular instance, Carthy answered the question but, on reflection, regretted revealing the information and, in subsequent interviews, would actively steer the conversation away from her family and upbringing. On illicit topics where the researcher would likely feel uncomfortable disclosing past experiences (e.g. prostitution solicitation, see Hammond, 2018), mutual disclosure has also been deemed inappropriate.

Broadly speaking, both authors have found it helpful to consider the *function* of mutual disclosure. If the function is to demonstrate to participants that they are not alone, there are other ways of achieving this. Drawing from the researcher's body of experience with other radicalised individuals may reassure participants that their past attitudes and behaviours, while harmful, are not anomalous. Such reassurances need not go into detail; for Carthy, assuring participants that, 'we have seen this with other radicalised people' or, 'this is something we've come to learn from other interviews' can create the same effect of empathy and trust-building without compelling the researcher to disclose specific, personal details about themselves or their families.

4.5 Financially Incentivising Participation

Even several years after disengaging, it is an unfortunate reality that many formerly radicalised individuals will find themselves with fewer employment-related opportunities than non-radicalised individuals. This may be the case for a number of reasons. First, radicalisation tends to unfold in early adulthood, a period when young people will typically spend time pursuing education or gaining the necessary experience to carve out a career, both of which function as part of a causal model of lifetime earnings (Card, 1999). The time spent engaging with extremist ideologies (many of which exist outside the realms of civic society) may detract from these pursuits and affect the radicalised individual's lifetime earning potential. Furthermore, the stigma associated with having been, at one time, a 'jihadist', a 'Nazi' or a 'Provo' could affect efforts or motivations to return to education or gain employment outside of extremist circles.

Irrespective of the underlying mechanisms at play, when these individuals are offered financial incentives to disclose their stories and participate in research, this disparity tips the balance of power, running the risk of the participant becoming somewhat dependent on the researcher. This power imbalance creates ethical issues, as well as methodological ones.

As part of Project 3, the authors were offered such an opportunity by a former neo-Nazi who was well-connected in former circles. The individual offered access to an untold number of potential interviewees by means of a contract and

cost-per-interview. While these types of opportunities are generally not lucrative enough to be termed empty choices,[4] the dynamic is problematic in that it lends itself to participants exaggerating or fabricating elements of their story to guarantee more interest from researchers, violating the criterion of 'believable descriptions and explanations' for any qualitative sample (Abrams, 2010, p. 540). In such a system, there is also no way of knowing whether interviewees' stories are genuine, nor is the balance of power adequate for candid disclosure. For this reason, neither author has ever offered financial incentives for participation. In the situation outlined above, we explained the ethical and methodological issues that such an arrangement would create, and although the participant was gracious, they did not provide access to any other participants beyond themselves.

4.6 Disclosure

A final set of ethical issues which may arise when collecting data on extremists or terrorists relate to disclosure; the risk of interviews leading participants to disclose incriminating or compromising information. Ours is not the first research area to be faced with this issue (Surmiak, 2020), nor are we the first researchers to comment on it in the context of terrorism (Dolnik, 2011; Hemmingsen, 2011). The conflict between ethical and legal responsibilities is salient for anyone conducting research on illegal activities.

During the infamous Boston College subpoenas scandal of 2011, researchers leading the 'Belfast Project' failed to fully inform participants to what degree they could protect their interview data, subsequently reneging on a priori assurances of confidentiality and passing along interview recordings to numerous authorities. The Boston College case has been described as a reckless approach to fieldwork and an attempt to 'shirk' ethical responsibilities to protect research participants (Palys & Lowman, 2012, p. 295). Ultimately, the events demonstrate how researchers can fail to protect interviewees if authorities take an interest in the data they gather.

Because of this case and others like it, we took steps to minimise the potential for disclosures of this nature. As mentioned in Sect. 4.2, participants were generally selected post-involvement, they were advised not to disclose anything that they have not previously disclosed to authorities, and they were fully anonymised in any publications pertaining to the research. Furthermore, we have tended to steer clear of ongoing criminal investigations, and we have made a point of not asking specific questions about the details of any criminal offences committed. For this reason, our fieldwork has not attracted undue attention from the media, nor have we been put into difficult, ethical positions comparable to the Boston College case. In fact, we

[4] The term 'empty choice' refers to the power imbalance created by individuals feeling as though they have no choice but to participate in research. This is a common ethical concern amongst biomedical researchers operating in sub-Saharan Africa who offer access to healthcare in exchange for research participation (Kingori, 2015, p. 772)

have so far not received a single request for access to the primary data that we have gathered for any of the projects described here.

Finally, there is another, more methodological, consideration relating to disclosure and the use of confidential sources in academic research. Although interviews with (former) extremists and terrorists can yield information and perspectives that would otherwise remain inaccessible, transcripts can usually not be made accessible for other researchers, limiting transparency and our peers' ability to replicate our findings. This also applies, though in a slightly different fashion, to information derived from governmental sources such as prosecution service dossiers. While anyone, at least in the Netherlands, can apply for access to such material, the route to replication is a time-consuming process even when permission is granted. It entails waiting several months for a response to the initial request, then contacting the particular public prosecutor's office where the files in question are stored to set up a meeting, then travelling to said location and looking up whether other researchers who have used this material have interpreted it correctly. However, beyond triangulation of such privileged material with publicly available sources where possible, there is, at present, little to be done about this situation.

5 Lessons Learned

It has been the intention of this chapter to demonstrate both the feasibility and utility of conducting interview-based fieldwork on extremists and terrorists. Through our own experiences, we have presented some practical techniques that can be implemented in similar contexts. However, we are also mindful that our experiences, while hopefully of some assistance, do not reflect the full depth and scope of fieldwork in this area. We have not engaged in participant observation, for instance, nor have we conducted ethnographic studies of those whom we seek to understand. What we offer, instead, is a portfolio of interviews with people of diverse convictions from which we have drawn a number of lessons. We will conclude this chapter with some more personal recollections, in line with one of the overarching goals of this edited volume.

Though it will come as no surprise to other researchers who have interacted directly with individuals who have been involved in acts of extreme violence (e.g. Hoffman, 2006; Horgan, 2004; Wood, 2018), their apparent 'normalcy' remains striking. While most scholars of terrorism take pains to avoid the empirically tenuous view of terrorists as wide-eyed fanatics or psychopaths unable to empathise with their victims (Crenshaw, 2007; Sarma, Carthy & Cox, 2022), the fact of their willingness to inflict great harm and suffering on others remains. Speaking with individuals who have legitimised and propagated extremist ideologies, committed hate crimes, or even engaged in terrorist attacks themselves, and noticing that they seem friendly, intelligent, and well-informed, can be jarring. Carthy spoke with a former al-Qaeda ideologue who described the 9/11 attacks as 'permissible'. When recounting an attack on an ethnic minority, a former Neo-Nazi described the

situation like a 'cat playing with a toy'. When asked if there was a line that they would not cross, a former bomb-maker in Northern Ireland simply replied 'no'. Listening to these stances can elicit feelings of contempt, hopelessness, and sorrow, particularly when thinking about victims of extremist violence. Similarly, Schuurman, on occasion, felt uncomfortably drawn between empathy and contempt, or even disgust. Empathy for the harrowing (childhood) experiences some interviewees recalled, or their understandable emotional reaction to instances of horrible suffering undergone by people they identified with. Contempt, however, for, in his view, the often ridiculous and societally damaging worldviews subsequently adopted; disgust, as well as sadness, when such convictions led to the perpetration of violence against innocent victims. However, while we have learned that these feelings can and do arise, they should never progress into *judgement* expressed to the interviewee.

Indeed, the discomfort that can arise from these encounters can serve as a reminder to researchers of their own biases. Schuurman, for example, once mistakenly categorised a former extremist as having been non-involved in terrorist violence, simply because their bearing and demeanour seemed to support this, and because there was very little publicly available information available on the individual's past conduct. Subsequently finding out that this person had, in fact, personally committed a terrorist attack using explosives and served significant time in prison because of it, was a stark reminder to avoid assumptions wherever possible.

Speaking with individuals who held extremist views but did *not* act on them provides glimpses of another uncomfortable truth, albeit one that should be evident for any student of history. Namely, that people can be intelligent, educated, and sociable, while at the same time consciously holding views whose implementation would lead to the murder of thousands, and the forced relocations of many more. This realisation can be jolting and may even risk the development of a quiet cynicism. Nevertheless, our fieldwork also reminds us of human beings' capacity for reflection and change, even in the most immersive and destructive of environments.

In our experiences, neither extremists nor terrorists are usefully viewed as a 'class apart'. Interviews are not only an important data-gathering tool, but a way for the researcher to challenge her or his own misunderstandings and biases about just what it means for an individual to 'be radicalised' or 'involved in terrorism'. Hopefully, the experiences and reflections shared in this chapter will be of some benefit to other scholars looking to conduct interviews with these hard-to-reach populations.

In closing, it feels appropriate to also contextualise the role of the individual, and therefore, the value of interviews with them, when it comes to understanding the 'how' and 'why' of involvement in terrorism. There is a risk, as scholars of this subject have long understood (Neidhardt, 1982), of addressing such complex questions exclusively through the lens of individual psychological or biographical assessments. The mechanisms underpinning terrorism and extremism extend beyond the individual to group and movement dynamics, as well as the broader social, political, and historical setting against which dissent, unrest, and violence occur. It is only in recognition of this broader context that interviews can gain their full value.

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