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Reporting Practices of Journal Articles that Include Interviews with Extremists

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ABSTRACT

The number of journal articles that rely on data derived from interviews with extremists has increased substantially over the past decade. This burgeoning invites the possibility that standardized reporting practices have not been explicitly clarified. To date, there has not been an adequate review of the methodological transparency of journal articles that include interviews with extremists. After content analyzing 48 articles involving such interviews, we found that field-wide methodological transparency is lacking. Recommendations are made with regard to enhancing methodological transparency, with the implication that consensus on optimal reporting practices within the extremism literature should be reached soon.

The importance of primary data collection is widely recognized across various scientific fields of study.[1] Primary data collection techniques within the social sciences (e.g., interviews) are important tools that provide researchers with an opportunity to directly ask subjects about life experiences and the meanings that actors ascribe to their experiences. Interviews also allow researchers to gather data that would otherwise be difficult to obtain through alternate methodologies.[2] However, the use of interviews is constrained by a number of factors (e.g., accessibility of research subjects). Some populations are more accessible than others, but even among "deviant" or hidden populations there is a long tradition of studies relying on interviews.[3]

Over the past decade the field of terrorism studies has grown rapidly across multiple disciplines.[4] Despite the substantial increase of terrorism research in recent years, proportionately few studies involve talking directly with terrorists; one study found that only one percent of terrorism studies incorporated structured and systematic interviews.[5] This tendency may reflect a larger problem within terrorism research: an overreliance on non-empirical studies such as "thought pieces."[6] In fact, one review article found that only 3–4 percent of terrorism studies relied on empirical data.[7]

The limited number of empirical studies is further complicated by questions about the consistency and transparency of studies that do rely on empirical data. In this article we examine the

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methodological content that scholars include within empirical journal articles involving interviews with extremists. More specifically, we relied on content analysis to determine whether methodological content included factors such as additional data sources, sample size, sample characteristics, analytic strategy, sampling design, and limitations. To date, there has been little effort in the field of terrorism studies to address methodological issues related to the use of interview data and how researchers report the different components of this methodology.[8]

The results suggest several key themes regarding the presentation of interview methods in extremism research. In general, a majority of studies that were examined provided minimal description of sampling, analytic strategy, and limitations. We discuss these findings in greater detail in the results section. In the next section we discuss the scientific method and the role of methods sections in terms of scientific research.

Taking Stock of the Field

An essential component of scientific research involves crafting a detailed methodology to guide the research process. Known widely as the "scientific method,"[9] there is a diverse range of techniques and strategies that constitute this process of knowledge discovery. A shared feature across the diversity of the scientific method is the idea that transparency and consistency are key aspects necessary for evaluating research findings and the methods used to obtain those findings.[10] As such, a common expectation of scientific research involves providing a methodological summary as a companion to research findings for audiences to understand the process by which researchers arrived at certain conclusions. In fact, a methods section is a common component of most scholarly peer-reviewed articles and helps distinguish scientific research from other, more anecdotal editorials or thought pieces.

A methodology is defined as a "theory and analysis of how research should proceed"[11] and includes the different types of techniques used to collect data. Previous research has highlighted the tension between what researchers actually do while gathering evidence and how researchers explain what happened during this process.[12] Our focus, however, involves methodological content in general, regardless of any discrepancies between what researchers say and do.

Although extremism studies have focused substantially on definitional issues,[13] radicalization theories,[14] and the construction of various databases,[15] to date there has been little effort within the field to address the current status of interview methods.[16] Horgan's article[17] provides an important first step in terms of discussing some of the challenges and benefits of utilizing interview methods to study terrorism. But, we focus on methodological issues not addressed in Horgan's review. In fact, to date there have been no studies that systematically analyze the methodological content of empirical journal articles that rely on interview data with extremists. Methodological assessments such as this offer an important opportunity to appraise or review the current strengths and limitations of empirical analyses of extremist behavior. In turn, this type of assessment sheds light on existing deficiencies within the field of terrorism studies and where future studies should focus in terms of refinement and elaboration.

Transparency and Consistency

The two key dimensions we use to evaluate methodological content include transparency and consistency. By "transparency" we mean the extent to which details about the research

process are provided in the manuscript. Higher levels of transparency suggest more details being provided, and lower levels of transparency indicate minimal detail—or even an absence of detail—about the methods. Transparency provides the larger research community with a frame of reference to assess findings. A high level of transparency is akin to a clearly written instruction manual or cooking recipe. A lack of transparency, on the contrary, makes it difficult to evaluate the validity of the inferences made and replicate the process used to make those inferences, which can hinder scientific advancement. Journal articles with less methodological detail—thus lower levels of transparency—may reflect some unknown extent of personal preference and/or value orientation toward scientific writing and how to structure a research article, as well as specific protocols related to an individual's methodological training.[18]

"Consistency" refers to the extent of agreement or overlap across articles in terms of what methodological content is included and where that content is located (e.g., a method section). Consistency is a measure of how much standardization exists in a particular area, and a lack of consistency prevents replication and validation. Comparative and meta-analytic studies depend, to some degree, on consistency in their evaluation. For example, we cannot compare the findings from two distinct interview studies about the personal backgrounds of terrorists if we do not know what types of questions were asked in each study. Limited reporting consistency produces a field of idiosyncratic studies that can only be assessed in isolation at best and thus prevent a fuller understanding of extremism and terrorism.

Interview Methods

Broadly speaking, interviews can be described as "guided conversations,"[19] and a wide variety of types of interviews exist.[20] The degree of structure imposed on an interview varies considerably from highly structured to unstructured formats where the subjects are provided substantial latitude in discussing issues they determine are relevant with periodic probes by the interviewer.[21]

There are many different types of interviews that researchers may use to study the lives of terrorists. For example, researchers may incorporate life history style interviews that are focused on gathering information about the individual's experiences.[22] Life history interviews produce accounts that comprise a story about an individual's life, and accounts provide an analytical repository for understanding the link between culture and individual behavior.[23] Other types of interviewing strategies such as "ethnographic interviews" rely on open-ended questions aimed toward understanding a particular culture, organization, or ideology.[24] The life history interview is focused on generating an entire account of a person's life whereas ethnographic interviews are focused on gathering information regarding specific cultural contexts and/or worldviews. In general, the interview method is multifaceted, diverse, and includes a wide range of styles that involve different strategies and goals. Given the intricacies and diversity of interviewing methods, it follows that well-developed and transparent methodological content (ideally within method sections) are critical for the purpose of external review and assessment. In the following section, we describe the method we used to determine the extent to which that is the case among empirical journal articles that included data derived from interviews with extremists.

Method

Article Selection and Gathering

To analyze interview methodologies, we exclusively sampled scientific journal articles and did not include book manuscripts. Although the exclusion of books limited the sample, the focus on peer-reviewed journal articles is consistent with past efforts to assess different types of trends within various scientific fields of study.[25] Book manuscripts are indeed an important source of scientific knowledge, but peer-reviewed journal articles typically represent the largest portion of research output in terms of publication type across the natural and social sciences.[26]

The primary criterion for inclusion in this study was whether an article contained information that had been derived from the direct interview of at least one former or current extremist. Articles were collected from EBSCO and were searched for using various combinations of the following key word roots: terror*, extrem*, radical*, cult*, interview*, field research. An asterisk indicates that multiple key words with the same root were searched for simultaneously (e.g., terror, terrorism, and terrorist). After a preliminary sample of articles was selected, forward and backward reference searching was employed whenever possible to ensure that the final sample was appropriately representative of the field. Forward reference searching is the process of reviewing articles that cited the source article (e.g., all of the articles that cited a seminal work in terrorism), whereas backward reference searching is the process of reviewing articles that were cited by the source article (e.g., the articles that a seminal work in terrorism used to build its theory and justify its choices).

Sample

A total of 48 articles fulfilled the primary criterion for inclusion in the current study (see Table 1 for the full list of articles). However, some authors generated multiple articles either from one sample or by adding to an original sample (i.e., interviewing more participants from the same population or interviewing members from a comparison group). Counting these articles as distinct entries would result in double counting, which can skew data and therefore result in misrepresentative conclusions. To mitigate these concerns, articles were combined into a single entry if (1) their analyses were derived from the exact same sample and (2) they did not differ markedly in their methodological transparency. Using these criteria, 12 articles were condensed into 5 distinct entries, resulting in a final sample of 41 distinct entries.

Coding Metrics and Procedure

Content analysis was used to code the current sample; content analysis can offer quantitative insights within a discipline that can be evaluated and then used to offer evidence-based recommendations for future directions.[27] Sample entries were content analyzed based on one measure of supporting evidence and five measures of methodological transparency. Entries were first coded to assess how much, and what type of, empirical evidence was gathered to corroborate interviewees' responses using a 3-point, Likert-type rating scale (1 = *entirely, or almost entirely, absent*, 2 = *low to moderate*, 3 = *high*). In this case, information contained within literature reviews did not count as supporting evidence. Entries coded as a 1 typically

Table 1. Articles within final sample.

Akchurina, Viktoria, and Anita Lavorgna. "Islamist Movements in the Fergana Valley: A New Threat Assessment Approach." *Global Crime* 15, no. 3/4 (2014): 320–336.

Ashour, Omar. "Lions Tamed? An Inquiry into the Causes of De-Radicalization of Armed Islamist Movements: The Case of the Egyptian Islamic Group." *Middle East Journal* 61, no. 4 (2007): 596–625.

Blazak, Randy. "White Boys to Terrorist Men: Target Recruitment of Nazi Skinheads." *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no. 6 (2001): 982–1000.

Blee, Kathleen M. "Becoming a Racist: Women in Contemporary Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups." *Gender & Society* 10, no. 6 (1996): 680–702.

Blee, Kathleen M. "White-Knuckle Research: Emotional Dynamics in Fieldwork with Racist Activists." *Qualitative Sociology* 21, no. 4 (1998): 381–399.

Blee, Kathleen M. "The Microdynamics of Hate Violence: Interpretive Analysis and Implications for Responses." *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 2 (2007): 258–270.

Boeri, Miriam Williams, and Natascia Rose Boeri. "Intergenerational Memories of Life in a Cult: A Course Analysis." *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research* 3, no. 2 (2009): 79–90.

Boeri, Miriam Williams. "Women After the Utopia: The Gendered Lives of Former Cult Members." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31, no. 3 (2002): 323.

Bosi, Lorenzo, and Donatella Porta. "Micro-mobilization into Armed Groups: Ideological, Instrumental and Solidaristic Paths." *Qualitative Sociology* 35, no. 4 (2012): 361–383.

Bosi, Lorenzo. "Safe Territories and Violent Political Organizations." *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 19, no. 1 (2013): 80–101.

Botha, Anneli. "Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization Among Individuals Who Joined al-Shabaab in Kenya." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 11 (2014): 895–919.

Canter, David, Sudhanshu Sarangi, and Donna Youngs. "Terrorists' Personal Constructs and Their Roles: A Comparison of the Three Islamic Terrorists." *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 19, no. 1 (2014): 160–178.

Coates, Dominiek D. "Counselling Former Members of Charismatic Groups: Considering Pre-involvement Variables, Reasons for Joining the Group and Corresponding Values." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14, no. 3 (2011): 191–207.

Coates, Dominiek D. "'Cult Commitment' from the Perspective of Former Members: Direct Rewards of Membership versus Dependency Inducing Practices." *Deviant Behavior* 33, no. 3 (2012): 168–184.

Coates, Dominiek D. "'I'm Now Far Healthier and Better Able to Manage the Challenges of Life': The Mediating Role of New Religious Movement Membership and Exit." *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 14, no. 3 (2012): 181–208.

Coates, Dominiek. "Post-Involvement Difficulties Experienced by Former Members of Charismatic Groups." *Journal of Religion & Health* 49, no. 3 (2010): 296–310.

Coates, Dominiek. "New Religious Movement Membership and the Importance of Stable 'Others' for the Making of Selves." *Journal of Religion & Health* 53, no. 5 (2014): 1300–1316.

Fangen, Katrine. "Separate or Equal? The Emergence of an All-Female Group in Norway's Rightist Underground." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (1997): 122–164.

Flanigan, Shawn Teresa. "Nonprofit Service Provision by Insurgent Organizations: The Cases of Hizballah and the Tamil Tigers." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (2008): 499–519.

Futrell, Robert, and Pete Simi. "Free Spaces, Collective Identity, and the Persistence of U.S. White Power Activism." *Social Problems* 51, no. 1 (2004): 16–42.

Futrell, Robert, Pete Simi, and Simon Gottschalk. "Understanding Music in Movements: The White Power Music Scene." *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2006): 275–304.

Garfinkel, Renee. *Personal Transformations: Moving from Violence to Peace.*. US Institute of Peace, 2007.

Gayer, Laurent. "'Princesses' Among the 'Lions': The Militant Careers of Sikh Female Fighters." *Sikh Formations* 8, no. 1 (2012): 1–19.

Horgan, John, and Max Taylor. "Playing the 'Green Card'–Financing the Provisional IRA: Part 1." *Terrorism & Political Violence* 11, no. 2 (1999): 1.

Horgan, John, and Max Taylor. "Playing the 'Green Card'– Financing the Provisional IRA: Part 2." *Terrorism & Political Violence* 15, no. 2 (2003): 1–60.

Horgan, John, and Max. Taylor. "The Provisional Irish Republican Army: Command and Functional Structure." *Terrorism & Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (1997): 1.

Ilardi, Gaetano Joe. "Interviews with Canadian Radicals." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 9 (2013): 713–738.

Jamieson, Alison. "Identity and Morality in the Italian Red Brigades." *Terrorism & Political Violence* 2, no. 4 (1990): 508.

Kenney, Michael, 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): 739–747.

Khan, Nichola. "Between Spectacle and Banality: Trajectories of Islamic Radicalism in a Karachi Neighbourhood." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36, no. 3 (2012): 568–584.

Kropiunigg, Ulrich. "Framing Radicalization and Deradicalization: A Case Study from Saudi Arabia." *Journal of Individual Psychology* 69, no. 2 (2013): 97–117.

Martín Álvarez, Alberto, and Eudald Cortina Orero. "The Genesis and Internal Dynamics of El Salvador's People's Revolutionary Army, 1970–1976." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 4 (2014): 663–689.

(*Continued on next page*)

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Merari, Ariel, Ilan Diamant, Arie Bibi, Yoav Broshi, and Giora Zakin. "Personality Characteristics of 'Self Martyrs'/'Suicide Bombers' and Organizers of Suicide Attacks." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (2010): 87–101.
Merari, Ariel, Jonathan Fighel, Boaz Ganor, Ephraim Lavie, Yohanan Tzoreff, and Arie Livne. "Making Palestinian 'Martyrdom Operations'/'Suicide Attacks': Interviews with Would-Be Perpetrators and Organizers." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (2010): 102–119.
Milla, Mirra Noor, Faturochman, and Djamaludin Ancok. "The Impact of Leader-Follower Interactions on the Radicalization of Terrorists: A Case Study of the Bali Bombers." *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2013): 92–100.
Nussio, Enzo. "Emotional Legacies of War Among Former Colombian Paramilitaries." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18, no. 4 (2012): 369–383.
Orsini, Alessandro. "Interview With a Terrorist by Vocation: A Day Among the Diehard Terrorists, Part II." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013): 672–684.
Ostovar, Afshon. "Iran's Basij: Membership in a Militant Islamist Organization." *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 3 (2013): 345–361.
Pope, Ricky J., and Shawn Flanigan. "Revolution for Breakfast: Intersections of Activism, Service, and Violence in the Black Panther Party's Community Service Programs." *Social Justice Research* 26, no. 4 (2013): 445–470.
Post, J., Sprinzak, E., & Denny, L. "The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 1 (2003): 171–184.
Reinares, Fernando. "Exit from Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement and Deradicalization among Members of ETA." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 5 (2011): 780–803.
Schbley, Ayla Hammond. "Toward a Common Profile of Religious Terrorism: Some Psychosocial Determinants of Christian and Islamic Terrorists." *Police Practice & Research* 7, no. 4 (2006): 275–292.
Simi, Pete, and Robert Futrell. "Negotiating White Power Activist Stigma." *Social Problems* 56, no. 1 (2009): 89–110.
Sonpar, Shobna. "A potential resource? Ex-militants in Jammu and Kashmir." *Intervention: International Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial Work & Counselling in Areas of Armed Conflict* 6, no. 2 (2008): 147–153.
Speckhard, Anne. "The Emergence of Female Suicide Terrorists." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 11 (2008): 1023–1051.
Speckhard, Anne, and Khapta Akhmedova. "Talking to Terrorists." *Journal of Psychohistory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 125–156.
Stern, Jessica Eve. "X: A Case Study of a Swedish Neo-Nazi and His Reintegration into Swedish Society." *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 32, no. 3 (2014): 440–453.
White, Robert W., and Terry Falkenberg White. "Revolution in the City: On the Resources of Urban Guerrillas." *Terrorism & Political Violence* 3, no. 4 (1991): 100.

relied on single-source, single-method approaches that did not include additional empirical evidence to corroborate interviewees' responses. Entries coded as a 3 often used multisource, multimethod approaches that included interviewing individuals from various populations (e.g., extremists from distinct groups/organizations, extremists' family members, non-extremists), as well as including a quantitative component such as thematically or content analyzing documents (e.g., propaganda, websites).

Entries were then assessed for their methodological transparency using a 4-point, Likert-type rating scale (1 = *entirely, or almost entirely, absent*, 2 = *minimal*, 3 = *adequate*, 4 = *exemplary*) across five distinct measures: extremist sample characteristics, sampling method, interview method, analytic method, and limitations (see Table 2 for an example rating scale for "sampling method"). "Extremist sample characteristics" includes information pertaining to the extremist sample (e.g., demographics). "Sampling method" corresponds to the ways in which extremist participants were selected, contacted, and recruited. "Interview method" pertains to the interview content (e.g., questions asked), the type of interview conducted (e.g., semi-structured), and the interview procedure (e.g., location of interview). "Analytic method" relates to information about analyses that were conducted on collected data (e.g., content coding, grounded theory analysis). Finally, "limitations" corresponds to the inclusion of methodological, theoretical, and practical limitations (e.g., small sample size, generalizability issues). Entries coded with a 1 for a measure typically did not include any information about that measure (e.g., did not mention limitations) or contained almost no information (e.g., listing broad ideological affiliation but no additional demographic information). Entries coded with a 4 often included very specific, highly transparent information about the measure of interest.

Table 2. Example benchmarked rating scale for description of sampling method.

1	2	3	4
Entirely, or almost entirely, absent Sampling method was not mentioned anywhere.	Minimal Few facets of sampling were mentioned	Adequate Participant selection, contact, and recruitment were mentioned, but not all were described in great depth.	Exemplary Participant selection, contact, and recruitment were all highly specific and transparent.

The metrics to be content coded were developed and refined by the authors. Trained raters—three doctoral students who have studied extremism, terrorism, and ideological violence—were familiarized with the rating metrics and individually coded 10 percent of the sample (i.e., 5 articles). So as to not artificially inflate interrater reliability, only "degree of supporting evidence gathered" and the five metrics of methodological transparency were coded. Interrater reliability was found to be adequate, ICC(2,1) = .84, indicating that the raters shared a common interpretation of the metrics. Based on this result, it was determined that having a single rater code the remaining articles would yield reliable data.

Results

On average, entries included extremist sample sizes of 26.71 ($SD = 25.69$), ranging from 1 interviewee to 95 interviewees; seven entries (17 percent) did not indicate interviewee sample size. Using the year 2015 as a reference point, the average age of each entry was 6.93 years ($SD = 6.23$), with publication dates ranging from 1990 to 2014; 33 entries (81 percent) were published between 2004 and 2014. These latter results tentatively indicate that journal publications involving direct interviews with former or current extremists are a relatively recent phenomenon.

The use of supporting evidence was entirely, or almost entirely, absent from 16 (39 percent) of the entries. Seven entries (17 percent) used a low to moderate amount of supporting evidence, and 18 (44 percent) used a high amount of supporting evidence. These results indicate that a majority of the articles in the sample (61 percent) included data that were derived from sources beyond direct interviews with current or former extremists.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of five distinct measures of methodological transparency. A majority of entries included at least adequate descriptions of extremist sample characteristics (68.3 percent) and interview methods (53.6 percent). Conversely, a majority of entries included mostly absent or minimal descriptions of sampling methods (61 percent), analytic methods (75.7 percent), and limitations (80.5 percent). Averaging across these five metrics yielded total methodological transparency scores that ranged from 1.00 (i.e., articles receiving a rating of 1 for all five metrics) to 3.80, with an average of 2.18 ($SD = 0.82$). To provide clarity for these specific reporting practices, as well as provide brief summaries of exemplary characteristics from select articles shown in Table 1, each measure will be discussed individually.

Extremist Sample Characteristics

This measure was consistently the most transparent. This result may initially be well-received in light of the other measures' lower scores, but one caveat must be made explicit:

Table 3. Methodological transparency of studies that included data derived from interviews with current and/or former extremists.

Metric of transparency	Entirely or almost entirely absent	Minimal	Adequate	Exemplary	Average (Mean)	Standard deviation
Extremist Sample Characteristics	17.1% (7)	14.6% (6)	39.0% (16)	29.3% (12)	2.81	1.05
Sampling Method	41.5% (17)	19.5% (8)	17.1% (7)	22.0% (9)	2.20	1.21
Interview Method	26.8% (11)	19.5% (8)	34.1% (14)	19.5% (8)	2.46	1.10
Analytic Method	65.9% (27)	9.8% (4)	14.6% (6)	9.8% (4)	1.68	1.06
Limitations	58.5% (24)	22.0% (9)	4.9% (2)	14.6% (6)	1.76	1.09

the characteristics themselves were not often described in the methods section. Instead, and due in part to smaller sample sizes of interview subjects, sample characteristics were generally described in the results section while contextualizing participants' narratives. Nussio[28] was an exemplary case because sample characteristics were succinctly described in text and summarized in a table, containing enough information at the group level to give fellow researchers a strong understanding of the sample, but not enough information to result in issues of anonymity. Nussio[29] included the following demographic variables: location of residence, age, gender, year of demobilization, former rank, and job situation.

Sampling Methods

Most of the articles did not include much, if any, description regarding the ways in which participants were recruited, approached, and selected. This measure of methodological transparency is rather unique within the field of extremism—especially terrorism—because of the clandestine activities that extremists often engage in. Specifically, the ways in which researchers contact and are allowed to interview certain extremist populations may not be reported in full, or at all, because of the level of secrecy that pervades certain extremist movements.[30] Boeri[31] was an exemplary case because the context in which participants were found and approached was described in great depth. Although Boeri[32] interviewed former cult members—thus bypassing certain issues of secrecy typically associated with violent extremists—the key takeaway is that a broader context for sampling was included and described when the norm is to exclude such details.

Interview Methods

Although a majority of the articles provided at least adequate description of interview methods, most of the articles did not go into procedural depth (e.g., describing the context in which interviews were conducted). As with the sample characteristics, most information pertaining to the interview methodology was contained in the results section of manuscripts, with that information largely being the interview questions that were asked. It was also frequently difficult to determine which results were gathered from the interviews and which were gathered from other sources. Kropiunigg[33] was an exemplary case because the interview was contextualized with regard to where it occurred, the kinds of questions that were

asked (and in what order), and provided theoretical justification for conducting the interview in a specific way.

Analytic Methods

This measure of methodological transparency received the lowest rating, but this result must be interpreted in light of the overwhelmingly large proportion of studies that were qualitative and descriptive in nature. In other words, qualitative studies are typically not held to the analytic standards that quantitative studies generally are, at least in terms of expectations for analytic transparency. Despite this caveat, most of the articles did not mention how interview data were analyzed (e.g., grounded theory, thematic analysis, or content analysis). Various political, sociological, and psychological theories were typically used to justify the studies' analyses, but full descriptions of the analytic methods used were almost entirely absent. Data preparation was also rarely mentioned, and when it was the following standardized phrase was used: "interviews were audio recorded and transcribed." Kenney et al.[34] was an exemplary case because the process of thematic analysis was explicitly described. In particular, Kenney et al.[35] mentioned that both interview data and field notes were analyzed, indicated which computer program was used to analyze the data, described the process of theming, and included initial theme counts and the process used for further thematic extraction.

Limitations

Descriptions of limitations, much like analytic methods, were almost wholly absent from this sample. When limitations were found, they were often short asides within the method section or conclusion, rarely labeled as limitations and not emphasized. Ilardi[36] was an exemplary case because limitations were made explicit and discussed at length. In particular, Ilardi[37] described issues pertaining to the representativeness of the sample, the generalizability of the data garnered from the sample, and how the sample may not directly inform the theory of radicalization toward violence.

Discussion

Broadly speaking, the results of this study suggest that most journal articles involving interviews with extremists are exceedingly low in methodological transparency. For example, many of the articles in the current sample contained pertinent methodological information only within footnotes or endnotes. Even when that information was described within the main body of text, there was a relative lack of consistency in terms of where that information was described and whether specific sections were labeled. These two specific reporting practices hamper the ability of researchers to find relevant or necessary methodological information when conducting literature reviews. This kind of methodological "hide and seek" could also inadvertently perpetuate a culture of ambiguity among researchers of extremism: what information should be reported, to what level of depth should that information be described, and where should it be reported. For example, while searching for articles for the current study, several articles that initially seemed eligible could not be included in the final sample because of a lack of explicit notation as to whether extremists (former or current) were interviewed.

It is unclear whether the results regarding limited methodological transparency and consistency are more pronounced within the field of extremism studies as compared to other fields of study. Although this question cannot be answered in the current study, there are two primary reasons as to why this may be the case. First, the interdisciplinary nature of terrorism studies may unintentionally inhibit a clear sense of which methodological components need to be reported. Second, a vast majority of the current sample included articles that were published within the last decade, which suggests a degree of "immaturity" in terms of professionalization.[38] As professionalization increases, norms may emerge that provide clearer expectations of what degree of methodological transparency is adequate and, eventually, optimal.[39] On the other hand, the results we found may not reflect the newness of extremism studies but rather a larger lack of emphasis on qualitative methods that cuts across the social sciences.[40] To answer this question, future studies should conduct a comparative content analysis of extremism studies with another, older subfield, such as the study of street gangs.[41]

Although not specific to the study of terrorism, another factor that may impact methodological transparency involves page limitations that typically characterize scientific journal submission guidelines. Page limitations are especially likely to impact qualitative research because results sections are generally longer than quantitative research due to interview quotes and observational descriptions. Manuscripts that include lengthy methods descriptions likely add substantial length in terms of page numbers and may suffer from more frequent rejection rates or requests to condense methodological discourse. Some researchers may remedy this problem by omitting detailed discussions of various methodological issues[42] or by referring to other sources (e.g., books) that allowed the researchers to explore methodological issues in greater depth.

Limitations

Before turning to the broader implications of these findings, we will highlight the primary limitation of our present effort; the sample was derived solely from journal articles. A substantial number of qualitative researchers, criminologists, and political scientists publish via books and book chapters, which may account, to some degree, for the relatively small sample size. The exclusion of books may have skewed the results in terms of lower scores, especially in the area of transparency. Book manuscripts clearly provide authors with greater space to discuss methodological details and, in some cases, include relatively lengthy methodological appendices. The extent to which the inclusion of books would have impacted the results, however, is an empirical question best suited for additional research. Future studies should apply the criteria of sample inclusion for the current study toward books and book chapters, thus yielding a sample that is more representative of the entire field of study.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Interview data are essential sources of evidence, critical for building an empirically based understanding of human-related phenomena. The field of ideological extremism should seek to increase reliance on this source of data. However, because interviews are being utilized more frequently, there needs to be greater methodological consideration for how this method is being used. The overall lack of methodological transparency and consistency that

we found suggests certain steps should be taken by the field to increase the reporting of the validity and reliability of the methods used to obtain inferences about the population of interest.

We offer three recommendations to increase transparency and consistency across the field for researchers who collect interview data from extremists. First, journal editors should establish reviewing criteria that require the assessment of what is included in the methods section. Reviewers likely do this individually, but many journals do not necessarily require this nor is it institutionalized in terms of an expected part of the review process. Establishing formal review criteria—such as those used to assess writing quality and journal fit—would provide a rubric for reviewers to use in applying common reliability and validity requirements about method choices and reporting of techniques used. We reviewed similar quality checklists for broader qualitative research evaluation and determined a number of criteria checklists for assessing methodological characteristics in general do exist,[43] but none specifically regarding criteria for (1) the interviewing method or (2) samples comprised of extremists. Thus, we have proposed a set of review guidelines that could be used to share and standardize rigor expectations among reviewers, and Table 4 offers proposed guidelines for reviewers evaluating journal manuscripts when interviewing extremists is one of the methodological approaches.

Second and relatedly, journal submission requirements should formalize expectations for the content to be included in the methods section. For example, a journal could list the following as part of its submission guidelines: We expect each manuscript's methods section to include the following: (1) accounts of methods used to obtain interview participants, (2) description of conditions in which interviews took place, (3) degree of structure in interview format (and sample interview questions when relevant), (4) procedures used to code and assess interview responses, (5) analytic methods used, and (6) limitations of the study (or studies).

Finally, the field of extremism should utilize other fields' ethnographic research strategies and norms for method reporting. Although researchers engaged in extremist interview studies have often been trained in fields rich with methodological rigor (e.g., sociology, criminology, anthropology), we rarely rely on these domains' reporting methods when describing the techniques used in gathering data for studies in conflict and terrorism. For example, a seminal study in medical sociology that assessed cancer patients' information needs and information seeking behavior described the conditions in which the patients were interviewed, the duration of the interviews, the nature of the questions, and the methodological strategy called framework analysis.[44] In addition, the field of extremism could also use method reporting found in domains where interview studies have been used with more frequency. For example, management researchers have utilized interviews to obtain data from "key informants" about inter-organizational relationships for at least four decades—so often that there are method articles written about obstacles to identify and sample informants from organizations in order to gain reliable reporting strategies to obtain perceptual agreement across multiple informants across an organization for indices of reliability.[45] Given that some analogy can be made between extremist organizations and other more conventional organizations[46] it makes sense to draw reporting strategies from such organizational fields to obtain inferences from individuals to broader groups, organizations, and movements. Thus, the evaluation criteria proposed in Table 4 draws from these broader domains as well, but tailored to unique populations of extremists.[47]

Table 4. Proposed guidelines for reporting technical considerations when interviewing current and former extremists.

Technical reporting considerations[1]	Y/P/N[2]; Comments
Sample and Sampling Method	
1. Are the techniques used in sample recruitment specified?	
2. Is the time frame for sampling stated?	
3. Is the relationship between the sample and the population specified (e.g., *n* size vis-à-vis the *N*, its generalizability, and its biases)	
4. If there are unique characteristics of the sample, are they mentioned (e.g., demographic variables)?	
Design	
1. Is the time frame to complete the study mentioned?	
2. Can the interview design be replicated with the amount of details provided?	
3. Are there multiple methods used (i.e., is it apparent what data came from which method source)?	
4. Are there any internal or external validity threats for this interview study as designed?	
5. Is there transparency about method and challenges encountered? Were limitations described?	
Interview Method	
1. Are the locations and settings of interviews described?	
2. Did interviewer meet with interviewees multiple times?	
3. Is the time frame to complete each interview mentioned?	
4. Is the script/question set available for review (e.g., on personal website of researcher)?	
5. Are the personal characteristics of the interviewer described (e.g., relationship between participants and interviewer, training of interviewer)?	
Data Processing and Analytic Method	
1. Is the transcription process clearly described (e.g., what was transcribed, how it was transcribed and by whom)?	
2. Is there a word and/or page count of transcripts specified?	
3. Are data analytic techniques clearly described (e.g., grounded theory, thematic analysis, or content analysis)?	
Ethical Procedures	
1. Are procedural ethics described (e.g., IRB [Institutional Review Board], informed consent, specific expectations of interviewees)?	
2. Are exiting ethics described (e.g., debriefing, continued relationships)?	

[1]The proposed guidelines are meant as suggestions for improving transparency and consistency. Some of the items may be more or less appropriate depending on journal submission standards and disciplinary preferences.
[2]Key: Y = Yes; P = Partially; N = No.
Source: Adapted from Dixon-Woods, Shaw, Agarwal, and Smith[47] and Holosko, Jolivette, and Houchins.[47]

Although this special issue is devoted to methodological issues associated with conducting research on violent extremism and terrorism, we identified perhaps a more subtle yet pernicious problem associated with such issues: the lack of consistent and transparent reporting of methods used to obtain primary data, as well as the strategies applied to code, analyze, and assess that primary data. Without detailed, substantiated reporting of the methods from which

inferences about data are drawn, it is impossible to move a field forward to generate consistent findings about phenomena of interest. In short, we have little doubt that the researchers associated with studies in the present effort apply highly rigorous criteria in selecting, recruiting, and interviewing extremists—perhaps more so than those highlighted in other domains as best practice in-depth interviewers. However, until journal editorial boards take a leadership role in standardizing how we report our interview methods, little will be done in a consistent, transparent manner to share these details for replication and validation.

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