

In Their Own Words? Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Terrorist Autobiographies

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Abstract

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Abstract

Despite the growth of terrorism literature in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, there remain several methodological challenges to studying certain aspects of terrorism. This is perhaps most evident in attempts to uncover the attitudes, motivations, and intentions of individuals engaged in violent extremism and how they are sometimes expressed in problematic behavior. Such challenges invariably stem from the fact that terrorists and the organizations to which they belong represent clandestine populations engaged in illegal activity. Unsurprisingly, these qualities make it difficult for the researcher to identify and locate willing subjects of study—let alone a representative sample. In this research note, we suggest the systematic analysis of terrorist autobiographies offers a promising means of investigating difficult-to-study areas of terrorism-related phenomena. Investigation of autobiographical accounts not only offers additional data points for the study of individual psychological issues, but also provides valuable perspectives on the internal structures, processes, and dynamics of terrorist organizations more broadly. Moreover, given most autobiographies cover critical events and personal experiences across the life course, they provide a unique lens into how terrorists perceive their world and insight into their decision-making processes. We support our advocacy of this approach by highlighting its methodological strengths and shortcomings.

Introduction

Terrorism scholars face critical methodological challenges with respect to the sensitive and often clandestine populations they seek to study. As Leiken and Brooke explained, the covert, underground status of terrorists presents tremendous obstacles to objective forms of open-source data collection, given terrorists are, by necessity, secretive about their operations, personal details, and membership.² The same is true of terrorist organizations especially with regard to their internal structure, processes, and group dynamics. Attempting to provide reliable answers to such basic questions as "how do people become involved in, or walk away from, terrorism?" pose significant challenges. Even former terrorists, much like those still engaged, may not want to be detected, much less approached for an interview by researchers eager to confirm or disprove their hypotheses about the role of certain factors and psychological processes in the development (or unraveling) of the terrorist career. This is especially likely to be the case for those individuals the full extent of whose prior involvement in terrorism still remains unknown to law enforcement or the general public. Representative samples of former participants can be exceptionally difficult to access, let alone procure for participation in research.

One readily available avenue for research, however, remains conspicuous by its absence of exploitation. The autobiographies of former terrorists, we argue, represent one potentially useful source of data, which, up until now, have received relatively little systematic investigation from scholars of terrorism.³ In this research note, we argue that the systematic analysis of the text contained in these autobiographies provides an important and potentially useful approach for certain aspects of terrorism research. The careful qualitative analysis of these texts provides valuable insight into the ways terrorists perceive their social world and the context, which shapes their attitudes and behavior. Unlike the analysis of one-off statements made by individual terrorists or the groups to which they belong, the close qualitative analysis autobiographies may allow a researcher to identify not only the likely proximate causes of the development of an individual's attitudes and behavior, but more distal factors as well. Further, the statistical analysis of key variables across a relatively large sample of autobiographies can help to strengthen the reliability of one's findings. Despite these advantages, we argue that any meaningful analysis of terrorist autobiographies should be informed by the methodological shortcomings of this approach, including an awareness of selection issues and potential biases that often arise in a terrorist's statements and more

specifically in their autobiographies. Moreover, we suggest that the analysis of terrorist autobiographies is most useful when rigorously triangulated against other data sources.

This note is divided into four sections. In the first, we highlight several studies, which have successfully utilized terrorist autobiographies to obtain information about difficult-to-research questions in terrorism studies. In the second section, we discuss the methodological advantages to analysis of the text contained in these autobiographies. In the third section, we highlight potential selection issues and biases that may arise in the analysis of such accounts. We conclude in the fourth section by summarizing the potential usefulness of analyzing terrorist autobiographies to inform other aspects of the research process and as a means of triangulating data sources.

Analyzing Terrorist Autobiographies

Recent studies reveal that the analysis of terrorist communications, and, in particular, the analysis of short statements issued by terrorist groups, online chatter, as well as longer communiqués, speeches, and interviews holds great promise. A special issue of the journal *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, for instance, showcases the ways in which the linguistic content analysis of material written by terrorists can be used to uncover relationships between the nature of group rhetoric and the incidence of terrorist violence. Based upon an analysis of 296 speeches, interviews, and articles by members of two violent and two non-violent Islamist extremist groups, Pennebaker suggested that in the month preceding a terrorist attack, the violent groups altered their language use in ways that "suggested less divergent thinking and cognitive complexity."⁴ In a similar fashion, Hermann and Sakiev conducted a systematic analysis of the rhetoric of the leaders of the same violent groups (al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qaida central) and were consequently able to chart systematic and observable changes in rhetoric during the period immediately preceding an attack.⁵ In previous studies, Smith, Suedfeld, Conway, and Winter and Smith coded and analyzed documents issued by terrorist groups, as well as relevant control groups operating in similar contexts with similar ideologies; these studies found that terrorist groups expressed significantly higher in-group affiliation, power-motive imagery, and lower out-group affiliation, as well as differences in value references and integrative complexity.⁶ Studies such as these provide additional insight into whether an extremist group might engage in violence based upon an analysis of their public statements and communiqués, as well as when an attack may be imminent.

Still, analysis of terrorist communications has rarely been extended to deeper consideration of autobiographical accounts. Despite calls as early as 1987 by Rapport and Cordes for the systematic analysis of terrorist memoirs or autobiographies, these longer, more detailed accounts of terrorist involvement remain largely unexploited.⁷ The paucity of studies is startling because, as Rapoport pointed out, these memoirs intuitively "ought to be very useful and revealing."⁸ Indeed, several recent studies highlight the ways in which the systematic analysis of these accounts can lend insight into the mindset of the terrorist or the inner-workings of terrorist organizations. Shapiro and Siegel, for example, analyzed 90 terrorist memoirs covering a range of terrorist groups, from Marxist groups in Russia in the late 19th Century to Western European leftist groups in the 1970s to the modern Islamist groups of today.⁹ They collected a wide array of information from these autobiographies, including the organization to which the individuals belonged, factors that might potentially bias their memoirs (e.g., their degree of repentance, whether they were a government agent or not), as well as a range of dichotomously coded variables of interest, including whether they mentioned disagreement with the group's political goals, tactics, and targets; problems maintaining discipline; levels of hierarchy within the group; and the degree of bureaucratic record-keeping. Shapiro and Siegel then subjected their data to quantitative analysis and found, consistent with their theory and controlling for a host of potential confounding variables, that terrorist organizations have strong incentives to keep security-reducing records in certain operational environments. Their analysis, moreover, suggests the quantitative analysis of information gleaned from terrorist accounts offers a useful complement to existing qualitative approaches. While the latter provides vivid insights into and illustrations of key organizational processes and issues associated with terrorist life, the former helps to establish the generalizability of one's findings across terrorists or terrorist organizations.

In a separate study, Teymur investigated the recruitment processes utilized by two different terrorist organizations, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C) and Turkish Hezbollah by content coding various data from terrorist autobiographies in addition to administrative reports and transcripts of interviews and interrogations.¹⁰ These materials were largely obtained from Turkish National Police operations and represented the communications of individual members within these terrorist groups.¹¹ Specifically, each of the organizations possessed an internal system of communications that required each member to write reports about a wide range of issues to inform the central committee, including intelligence reports, daily activity reports, and evaluations and recruitment reports. As such, the documents were not only written by

actual members, but also included detailed explanations of the processes by which these individuals became sympathizers and eventually members of each group. As Teymur noted, these documents were written voluntarily, and not coerced, and thus may have suffered less from certain biases resulting from communications targeted at external audiences (although we would contend that they may also be *more* likely to suffer from certain biases when written for an internal audience such as group leaders who expect the individual to espouse the ideology).¹² In turn, Teymur was able to leverage these sources to answer key questions regarding terrorist recruitment, including how individuals might be deterred from joining or carrying out terrorist activities; what factors are related to joining a terrorist organization; what are the recruitment processes employed by DHKP/C and Turkish Hezbollah, specifically; what are, if any, the common recruitment procedures utilized by both groups; and finally what are the similarities and differences between these organizations.¹³

Extending these findings, Yilmaz utilized the content-coded data gleaned from Teymur's study to examine the patterns of involvement among individuals in terrorist groups.¹⁴ As noted by Yilmaz, autobiographies offer valuable information related to the demographics, motivations, and family backgrounds of individual terrorists.¹⁵ As such, Teymur's 219 terrorist autobiographies yielded consistent information across sources regarding individual members' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, marital status, social class) as well as variables associated with relative deprivation (e.g., education, work status), frustration (e.g., school dropout status, loss of a loved one in a counterterrorism operation, prior arrests of family members), and social learning (e.g., family association to a terrorist group, recruitment method); and Yilmaz found that levels of terrorist involvement, at least in the DHKP/C and Turkish Hezbollah, could be explained by differences across the latter three categories of variables, controlling for demographic factors.¹⁶

Methodological Advantages

Studies such as these highlight the ways in which terrorist autobiographies may be subject to systematic analysis to gain insight into difficult-to-research questions. One advantage to analyzing terrorist autobiographies is that the analysis is based on primary, rather than secondary, sources. By letting the terrorists and former terrorists "speak for themselves," the approach increases the likelihood that the data one obtains are valid and meaningful representations of the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of those involved in terrorism, and that they are reliable reflections of the mindset of participants at that particular point in their

developmental trajectory of involvement, engagement, and disengagement.¹⁷ Researchers, of course, will need to be attuned to and account for potential biases in the autobiographies, given authors may legitimize, rationalize, and justify their previous behavior as well as offer propaganda to further a group's "message" and cause. However, as noted by Cordes, these primary source materials are in large supply and are often more revealing than the author necessarily intends.¹⁸

Furthermore, it might be argued that regardless of whether an individual terrorist or former terrorist rationalizes their previous involvement, their accounts nevertheless still offer a lens through which to understand how terrorists construct their social realities, interpret their environments, and make critical life decisions. That is, terrorist autobiographies provide a window through which to examine how terrorists and former terrorists attach meaning to important life events and how their decisions are shaped by their unique cognitive interpretations of the world. Thus, terrorist autobiographies and statements, we argue, consistent with Cordes, reflect the best, and often only, insider perspective on terrorist life and thinking. They provide insights into the ways in which current and former terrorists perceive themselves, what they believe they are doing (or did in the past), and what they think their actions will (or did) accomplish. Though a common informal criticism of the use of terrorist autobiographies is that "they aren't telling the truth," the issue of the accuracy of recollected events represents only one of several critical features of interest in examining these sources. A more important dimension of interest is in how we understand the meaning of events for the individual and the context in which critical decisions or judgments were made. The same issues arise, for example, in first-hand interviews with former participants.

Second, when undertaking a content analysis of terrorist autobiographies the researcher only needs access to the specified recorded material to be coded in order to proceed with the analysis.¹⁹ While the degree to which one is able to access relevant source information depends on the phenomenon under investigation and the unique characteristics of a particular study, content analytic techniques used in the context described here (and used on terrorist communications more broadly) hold the advantage of being more feasible and economical in terms of time, labor, and money rather than, for instance, a large-scale survey or extensive field or ethnographic work.

Third, because the data are already in hand, researchers may be able to rerun their own (or others') analysis more easily to test a new variable, correct errors in a previous study, utilize a new method of measurement, or ensure the reliability and replicability of the findings.²⁰ Re-conducting

an interview, a survey, or an experiment can be time-consuming and costly. Moreover, with respect to field research, if something goes wrong in the study, it may be nearly impossible for the researcher to obtain access to the particular event or phenomenon of interest (given it may no longer exist). With content analysis, however, it is usually just a matter of recoding and/or reanalyzing data that are already in hand.

Fourth, while many survey-based studies tend to suffer from cross-sectional data collection approaches where predictor and criterion measures are collected at the same point in time, content analysis often permits the researcher to study the processes, which underlie a specific phenomenon over a long period of time.²¹ For instance, Mumford's analysis of 120 historically notable leaders, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Martin Luther King, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, among others, permitted the study of outstanding forms of leadership across time, including the years spanning the leaders' rise-to-power, pinnacle-of-power, and fall-from-power.²² In a similar fashion, one could use the life-histories of terrorists, for example, to identify the range of factors offered in accounts of individuals' disengagement from and re-engagement in terrorism, but also whether these differ based on the reasons for their initial involvement and their experiences and roles held in the terrorist organization as well as other socio-demographic factors that might have influenced the choices they eventually made. Related to the temporal issue, terrorist autobiographies offer the advantage of providing information that tends to span most, if not all, of the individual terrorist's life course. As such, it is possible to examine a wide array of terrorism-related issues, such as reasons for engaging in terrorism, factors associated with sustained involvement, as well as those linked with disengagement.

Fifth, content analysis, like comparative historical analysis, has the advantage of being unobtrusive in that the researcher is unlikely to influence the subject of his or her study during the data collection process.²³ This is not true of more obtrusive forms of research such as surveys, interviews, and fieldwork, where the researcher often interacts with and potentially influences those being observed and the data collected. For instance, in field or ethnographic work, it is likely that the subjects being observed will behave quite differently precisely because they are being watched. Likewise, the wording and ordering of questions by a researcher has the potential to introduce bias into a survey, particularly when questions and available answer choices are unclear or questions are sensitive. The same is true of experiments when interventions are poorly designed or subjects are aware of the intent of the study. Thus, content analysis, limits *reactivity* or a change in the subjects' behavior due to: 1) their

knowledge that they are being observed, 2) their expectations about their role in the study or how they should behave/feel, 3) their interaction with the researcher, or 4) the artificiality or unfamiliarity with the task.²⁴

Finally, as noted by Krippendorff, other advantages to the content analytic approach are that it compensates for researchers' inability to directly observe the target phenomena (as is the case with terrorists) and allows for the collection of a large number of observations for statistical analysis.²⁵ The method also allows the researcher to translate unstructured material into data, while still being sensitive to the larger external context (which is not the case with, for instance, with laboratory experiments).²⁶

Methodological Shortcomings

The use of historical sources, including autobiographies, to quantitatively test hypotheses related to terrorism is always limited by certain methodological shortcomings. First, as mentioned earlier, content analytic approaches are hindered by their reliance on available records of source material.²⁷ As such, while certain social phenomena may have a rich source of recorded information for researchers to draw on (e.g., speeches of former U.S. Presidents, corporate philosophies of world business leaders), other phenomena may be less well documented (e.g., childhood upbringings of Hamas members). Moreover, with regard to terrorism specifically, certain individuals may only detail certain aspects of their life history and further may be selective in what they choose to disclose information about. The same is true of terrorist organizations, which may only publicly reveal certain facets of their internal structure, operations, etc. As noted by Shapiro and Siegel, for instance, ex-terrorists and those who edit their manuscripts may only report what they consider exciting, interesting aspects of their life leaving the researcher lacking access to more mundane, but essential information.²⁸ Conversely, ex-terrorists and the editors of their memoirs may also exclude details of highly controversial events or attitudes that could pose a risk to their safety or others. As such, because of valid concerns about 'completeness,' researchers may lack crucial details about key events in terrorists' life courses and corresponding emotions or attitudes.

Second, in many cases samples of recorded material may be tainted by potential biases. Indeed, certain terrorists and former terrorists may be more likely to write autobiographies, and there may be something systematically and crucially different about these terrorists in terms of personality, motivation, and other individual differences when compared with the more general population. As noted by Shapiro and Siegel, one might be

rightfully concerned that there are certain characteristics of terrorists that could potentially bias these sources and result in skewed inferences about the internal workings and psychological processes governing terrorist phenomena.²⁹ Shapiro and Siegel, for instance, noted that individuals who write memoirs often have strong motivations to portray their actions in the most favorable light possible. Cordes highlighted that such authors may choose not to report important details in their life history or they may use their autobiographies to pursue political ends, sensationalize events, and rationalize prior actions to governments, their constituencies, other terrorist groups, and themselves.³⁰ As such, it is to be expected that former terrorists who recall and reconstruct their participation in especially favorable terms, what is often referred to as "hindsight bias," are also those who are more likely to minimize the extent to which they report and discuss issues related to intra-organizational strife and conflict, and vice-versa for those who are government agents formerly embedded in terrorist cells.³¹ Thus, the data that researchers obtain via content analysis may be less valid if the intention is to assess actual events as opposed to how events are represented.

Third and related, the results of quantitative analyses of autobiographical material are dependent on the sources available and consulted, and there may be selection issues in the sample of communications one obtains. This is especially true when certain recorded communications are not accessible for various reasons (e.g., destruction, security issues, etc.). It is also likely that when the intent of the study is to make inferences regarding a larger population beyond those individuals or organizations whose communications are included in the sample. For example, because the successful waging of a terrorist campaign necessitates that a terrorist organization and its members remain somewhat clandestine, it seems likely that members of terrorists groups who have already laid down their arms, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the African National Congress, are more likely to write autobiographies than those still engaged in violence (e.g., al-Qaida, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Continuity IRA). As such, the sample of terrorist autobiographies that are available may not represent a random sample of the universe of terrorist groups or of individual terrorists. This problem is further complicated by the inherent biases introduced by various problematic elements of the sources, such as those discussed above. Again, splitting or stratifying the sample by potential selection issues (e.g., whether the terrorist was a member of a group that collectively disengaged) and qualifying one's findings are two ways to address these issues in any analysis.

Fourth, similar to any research methodology, the reliability and validity of content analysis may be limited by faults in research design and implementation. The choices individual researchers make in defining, conceptualizing, operationalizing, measuring, and analyzing key variables and in their sampling design may taint their findings. Of particular importance to content analytic techniques that use individuals rather than computers to code key variables is the assurance of intra-coder and inter-coder reliability. *Intra-coder reliability* refers to the likelihood that any single individual codes the same content in a similar fashion at more than one point in time. *Inter-coder reliability* refers to the likelihood that, given the same material, any two coders will code the content in a similar fashion. In order to ensure and increase intra-coder and inter-coder reliability, it is often prudent for researchers to develop and pilot test detailed and clear coding protocols (e.g., the method for collecting the data, the application of the codebook). An additional factor important for content analyses is that the coders are blind to the researchers' key hypotheses. Knowledge of these hypotheses might bias the findings as coders might, consciously or subconsciously, search for and favor certain variables over others.

Conclusion

Despite the potential biases and selections issues that may arise in the analysis of autobiographical accounts written by terrorists and former terrorists, we believe that the qualitative and quantitative analysis of these texts still holds great promise particularly for difficult-to-research topics in terrorism. Given renewed emphasis in the terrorism studies community on the value of integrating computational and qualitative methods even within limited (small-n) data,³² at the very least, we would expect autobiographical accounts of terrorists and former terrorists to offer one kind of data point against which other data may be triangulated. In particular, the availability of first-hand interviews with former terrorists appears to be on the increase.³³ Interviews with individuals involved (or formerly involved) in terrorism certainly provide a useful avenue to investigate the attitudes, intentions, and behavior of these individuals as well as the internal structures, processes, and group dynamics of the organizations to which they belong. Although the costs and time associated with interviewing often preclude researchers from obtaining sufficiently large enough samples for any sort of meaningful statistical analysis and issues associated with obtaining a representative sample, and thus, establishing the generalizability of the findings remain, interviews can aid in establishing causality between key variables as opposed to sheer correlation or association (which is most commonly the

case in statistical analyses). Interviews can also offer a deeper insight into the psychological processes at work, as well as how and why certain factors interact to shape the incentive structure and decision calculus of terrorists who are, for example, about to disengage or former terrorists on the precipice of re-engaging in violent activity.

For those former terrorists who are still alive, the careful reading of a terrorist's autobiography can provide researchers with added insight during all stages of the interview process, from the first point of contact, through addressing necessary security concerns in arranging the interview, and in the tailoring of questions. Having a deeper knowledge of an individual's upbringing, the reasons for his or her involvement in terrorism, experiences in the terrorist group, and disengagement and, if applicable, re-engagement allow a researcher to establish rapport with the interviewee and ask targeted questions focused on a particular event or decision in his or her life course. Further, many times, the use of targeted questions based on one's autobiographical account helps to uncover any attempts in the work to sensationalize events or editorial decisions to remove or dramatize certain events. The reading and systematic analysis of these autobiographies can also provide researchers with additional insight into clandestine organizations that he or she may want to try to study in the field. A deeper knowledge of the inner-workings of these groups is crucial when approaching members of their political front or the actual clandestine organization. A deeper understanding of the value of this source of data is critical before we can begin to conduct the kinds of rigorous data analysis that would allow for greater statistical inference in generalizing across autobiographies. It is our modest hope that this article contributes to that awareness.

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