

Ethnographic Approaches in Terrorism Studies and Research

by anastasia filippidou

Introduction

In social science, research topics are neither neat nor clinical, rather they are characterised by overlaps and grey areas. This is strongly evident in ethnographic methodologies of protracted violent ethnically based conflicts. A variety of issues including but not limited to territory, history, economics, culture, religion, civil rights, and exclusivist identity, which on their own could constitute themes of research, become interlinked and interdependent in ethnographic methodologies. This multifaceted nature becomes a very satisfying challenge once the research is completed, and the process resembles more of a Van Gogh painting with the dramatic and overlapping bush strokes, which from close gives a fragmented impression, but once completed and from a distance gives a unique result.

This chapter discusses the rationale behind the decision to adopt an ethnographic research method in terrorism studies, and it examines the strengths, and challenges of the ethnographic approach. Ethnographic methodologies in terrorism studies focus on a breadth of topics and depth, as their emphasis is on the human element and the need to observe and actually interact with the research's key protagonists of the conflict in their real-life environment. However, for some this is equated to condoning the terrorists' acts. This chapter provides insights into the challenges, opportunities, and benefits of conducting primary research through the lens of ethnographic research methodologies and it is based on the author's personal fieldwork experiences on investigating violent ethnonational conflicts.

A key recommendation is the importance and utility of a pragmatic empathetic ethnographic approach in researching terrorism and political violence. With reference to case studies the chapter highlights the appropriateness of the specific research method when investigating predominantly ethnonational violent organisations. There is a plethora of historical and contemporary non-state terrorist organisations with deep nationalist roots. The ideas discussed in this chapter are the outcome of primary research predominantly from the cases of Spain/Basque country, France/Cosica, UK/Ireland, Israel/Palestine. Although, no two cases are

identical, they share enough similarities to form a recognizable community of cases (Poggioli 2015; Filippidou 2007).

Ethnographic Approach: the Umbrella Method

Social science researchers investigate concepts and events which can never be wholly explained and understood by trying to arrive to the best knowledge available at a certain point in time and within the specific conditions internal and external to the research. Researching terrorism and political violence entails much more than just identifying and measuring violent acts, rather it is a broad, complex, and ever-changing phenomenon. In this sense, the broader the themes to be researched, the more the data and information that is collected, which in turn should render the researcher's endeavours fruitful.

Jackson et al (2011) argues that terrorism is fundamentally a social rather than a brute fact, and although terrorism is experienced as the latter by its direct victims, its wider socio-political and cultural impact is interpreted and received differently within the same community. This is very prominent in ethnographic approaches, where political violence is decided by socially negotiated agreement and inter-subjective practices involving most aspects of society (Jenkins, 2003).

Admittedly at times, it is the very case study that selects the methodology. In violent ethnic conflicts the aim of the protagonists, is to correct an injustice of the past, real or perceived, and they do not want to change the world order. Hence the conflict appears to be pervasive and lasting on the one hand, but also of limited and specific aim on the other, which emphasises the multifaceted nature of ethnographic research of these conflicts. 'It is here' argues English (2019: 269) that there can be both 'the instrumental appeal of struggle, as a means of achieving worthwhile goals, as well as the attraction inherent in the struggle itself, with its psychological rewards'. From the above emanates that these conflicts entail more than just passive membership in a particular ethnonational community and it requires social strife including individual and collective mobilisation, and an organised struggle for shared aims.

Through the use of ethnographic approaches the researcher can examine the phenomenon of terrorism and political violence at different levels and through different perspectives including but not limited to the actors, the targets, and those involved in countering the phenomenon. The field of terrorism and political violence is submerged in subjectivities, and ethnographic

methodologies reflect this very clearly. Ethnographic approaches entail tangible issues such as territory, but also intangible such as the affective element, and identity. This can be a challenge, as it can easily lead the research down rabbit holes, but it also gives this type of research its distinctiveness and provides an opportunity for a well-structured multi-topic research. The breadth of the research categories in ethnographic methodologies provide investigative flexibility. Identity for instance, is multifaceted and ethnographic approaches act as a thematic umbrella that encompasses a variety of topics including cultural, historical, ideological and religious contexts. What adds to the research complexity is that homogeneity is non-existent, and the lack of uniformity is evident within a movement or even within the same organization. In all case studies examined there are variations such as autonomists, independentists, regionalists, and actually the separatist movements themselves have been perpetually fraught with divisions, fractures, and competing claims to ethnic legitimacy. Although this becomes a challenge in a research, this variation is not a weakness, as it is often portrayed by the opposing parties, but just a fact that a researcher has to take into consideration. What is important is that the common denominator between these variations is their starting point that is, in some way they are all unhappy with the status quo. In sum, the ethnonational idea of community is multilevel and multifaceted with deep roots in the past and strong commitment to a different future.

With reference to the tangible and intangible aspects of violent conflicts, ethnographic approaches become an umbrella research method that has to deal with a number of themes about the very strong feeling of belonging which is promoted by shared means and ends expressed either through ‘a shared territorial attachment, shared economic interests, religion, history and values, or through an exclusivism which comfortingly separates us from an outgroup’ (English, 2019: 269). Although not all of the above features are present at every conflict, a number of them do need to be present, highlighting the complex and complicated nature of an ethnographic research methodology. Thus an ethnographic researcher cannot just deal with the measurable and practical aspects, but there has to be particular focus on the affective and hence subjective element. This duality of the affective and the tangible aspect within each of the above elements helps explain the resilience, and lasting appeal of ethnonational violent conflicts.

The Beauty of and Necessity for Fieldwork

The chapter leaves out a discussion on the ethics approval process prior to conducting fieldwork. This is not because the topic is not important, but because most universities by now have internal review bodies in order to approve researches involving human subjects. Given the nature of terrorism and political violence any researcher will have to go through a thorough ethics process, as it is unlikely that any ethnographic study in this field will fall into the category of low risk research. These processes are well established by now in universities and are particular to every institution. Researchers just have to follow their organisation's procedure. These procedures have not been set up to off put the researcher. After all as Silke (2004: 13) argues 'the idea that terrorism research is inevitably highly dangerous and risky is mistaken'. The key to successful fieldwork is preparation, in depth knowledge, awareness, realistic expectations by the researcher, and above all using common sense.

For studies that adopt an ethnographic approach fieldwork is vital. For conflicts that entail identity, and calls for territorial independence the terrain provides historical and current contextualisation on many levels for both the subject of study but also for the researchers. 'Quite simply', Dolnik (2011: 7) argues, 'one can read all available books and sources on a particular terrorist campaign, but without field visits and exposure to the environment there is much tacit knowledge the researcher simply will not be aware of'. 'A fieldwork, as personal as it is political and theoretical, deepens the understanding of ethnographers, of the people with whom they associate, and of the violence they study' state accurately Robben and Nordstrom (1995: 14ff). Even more, the combination of a number of issues such as territory, history, economics, culture, religion, civil rights, along with an exclusivist identity, and by the way each of these topics could constitute themes of research on their own, become a unique interlink and interdependence in ethnographic methodologies.

Thus, the fieldtrips are not merely about geography, but about geopolitics. Geography becomes a point of reference, but it can also provide a distorted reflection of an environment. Human minds carry psychological maps, as they are inclined to reimagine their territory in ways that suit assumptions about their identity and their security interests (Filippidou, 2020). Geopolitics is interactive, and, as Hans Weigert (1942: 23) suggests, 'where the forces of the earth, where the spaces of state systems have become part of an ideology for which men are dying, we are no longer confronted with 'facts' alone: geopolitics does argue. It argues against us'. In this sense, territory provides opportunities and constraints, which is also reflected in ethnographic methodologies.

Through fieldtrips, ethnographic researches explore phenomena that are defined by local settings. A fieldtrip, through the actual geography and because of the human proximity emphasises that in ethnonational and identity violent conflicts what takes place in reality is the clash of competing non-state and state nationalisms and identities, each resorting to some type and degree of violence. Indeed empirically, state responses to ethnonational terrorism have been quite nationalistic. However, state nationalism is considered as legitimate, and non-state nationalism is illegitimate, or at the very least negative, and very often is categorised as the cause of the conflict. Yet, it is the mutually shaping relationship between these rival nationalisms that is crucial in researching such conflicts (English, 2015). For instance, instead of merely focusing on the FLNC's violence (Corsican National Liberation Front) and elevating it from a symptom to a cause, the focal point should be the long term relationship between competing French and Corsican nationalisms.

The Relationship between Researchers and Interviewees

Primary research and especially interviewing those involved in violent ethnic conflicts requires that researchers in effect treat interviewees as co-participants. Interviewing people who are still active and participate or have participated in violent ethnic conflicts is not just limited to asking them questions about what they do. It is much more intrusive and it has more to do with talking with them about who they are, as well as about their day to day lives. It has to do also with the interviewees risking from their side to get arrested when participating in a research, as was the case in the French part of the Basque country when I was interviewing the co-founder of ETA Iulen de Madariaga, or when meeting Arnaldo Otegi the leader and spokesperson of Batasuna, the main independentist movement when it had just been banned for being accused of having links to ETA.

In this context, the interviewees are not passive interlocutors, but rather forceful personalities with strong narratives, even if subjective. Clifford (1988: 112) rightly states that 'ethnographic self-fashioning presupposes lies of omission and of rhetoric, [but] it also makes possible the telling of powerful truths. In point of fact if the researchers are not well prepared and confident they might end up being *talked to* by the interviewees instead of *talking with* them. Even though Bourdieu argues that 'it is the investigator ultimately who starts the game and who sets up its rules [...] without any preliminary negotiations, assigns to the interview its objectives and uses'

(1996: 19), directly or indirectly the interviewees can set the tone and the agenda. Consequently, even though there may be an asymmetry in favour of the researcher, in reality there is often an element of varied dependency, as the interviewees have first-hand and insider's knowledge, which the researcher needs. This kind of dependency adds to the complexity of conducting primary research on contemporary violent ethnonational conflicts, which in turn renders impartiality urgent and challenging at the same time.

Donlik (2011: 5) argues that given the highly emotional and subjective nature surrounding terrorism, available data tends to be heavily politically manipulated by all sides, requiring a higher standard of verification to ensure the reliability, validity, and accuracy of data and information collected from in-country sources. It is true that the interviewees provide their own narratives of the conflict, but still the researcher through a synthesis and analysis of these different narratives aims to untangle the complexities of the conflict and tries to make the conflict and its causes lucid and comprehensible. Within this context, an additional bias highlighted by Stern (2006: 184) emanates from the fact that the narrative of the interviewees takes place in a specific moment, which crucially informs the story told. Thus, it became evident that semi-structured interviews were the best fit for my the ethnographic research, and they were used in all case studies. The 'semi' part gave freedom for the interviewees to talk freely enough, while the 'structured' part provided protection from the risk of ending up with just subjective narratives and rabbit holes from the interviewees.

Despite the fact that 'when people look back on something they often have a different construction of that than it was for them at the time' and can be 'now much more critical of the process than they would have been two-three years ago because it has not worked out quite the way they expected' (Alderdice, 2005), the contribution of those directly involved in a conflict and its resolution is invaluable in a research. Even though hindsight may blur an argument there are no guarantees that other sources are more objective, as all humans can fall victim of retrospection and at least those interviewed where there in the conflict and during the efforts to resolve it.

Interviews are not useful just because a researcher managed to take them, they are useful if they are made relevant and if they bring the researcher closer to answering the research question at hand. When on the one hand, the component of identity is involved, as well as the affective

element with all its interpretations and subjectivities, and on the other there are pragmatic targets and deadlines for the researcher, open ended and unstructured interviews can create more difficulties rather than bring researchers closer to their aims. After all the researcher wants to obtain specific information on the conflict from the interviewees who are, however, talking about their lives past, present, and future. Thus, in order to be efficient and effective a kind of filter is needed, because as Said argues ‘facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation’ (Said, 1997: 162). Semi-structured interviews provide enough freedom for co-participants to open up and talk more broadly, as they might provide information that the researcher would not have thought to ask about. At the same time, semi-structured interviews offer enough guidance so that the information provided is useful and relevant. This protects the researcher from becoming overwhelmed by data and information on conflicts that may be centuries old with each conflicting side providing its own narrative and its own version of truth. This is why the interviews and the fieldtrip have to be timed correctly. Too early in the research and a lot of the necessary and relevant information will be left out, too late and the interviews become of limited use as the findings would not reflect reality. After all it is not uncommon to come out from an interview with militants and realise that they did not provide any extraordinary and insightful information. There might be occasions for repeated interviews, but that is not always the case, which is why the researcher has to get it right the first time.

Given the nature of the phenomenon of terrorism, access to militants is limited which can put a question mark on the representativeness of the collected data. Often militants advocate that they talk for the organisation, which can be true as they are often designated by the organisation to talk. Interestingly but at the same time quite frustratingly in violent ethnic conflicts once a researcher talks to a member of a separatist organisation, any other member of that organisation will give the same answers. ‘You talked to him, what different answers do you want from me’ a frequent comment would be.

Within the context of an academic research, the fact that the subjects of study become co-participants does not also elevate them and grant them a status of equality with the researcher. On the other hand, however, an aspect that is idiosyncratic to ethnographic studies, especially when the researcher is not of the same ethnographic community, is the matter of legitimacy. Interviewees’ comments of ‘why are you investigating this conflict, it is not as if you do not have similar conflicts in your country?’ are not uncommon, and it is not unusual for the

interviewees to question the intentions and legitimacy of the researcher. The belief is that although anybody can be a member of a specific ideological or religious organisation irrespective of the ethnic background, not everybody can be a member of an ethnonational community.

From this legitimacy springs the issue of trust between the interviewee and the interviewer. An interview may be granted based on the perception of whose side is the researcher on. To an extent this is understandable, as it links to a pragmatic need for self-preservation, since the participants are members of ethnonational violent organisations and are often under observation or being pursued by the authorities. Fieldwork ethnographic methodologies invite researchers to form rapport with specific community members in order to create the necessary environment for the interviewees to want to share their stories, experiences, and analyses that are then transformed by the researcher into data and into new knowledge. Furthermore, of particular importance is how the research is presented to potential interviewees. On a number of occasions during the initial contact requesting an interview the first reply has been ‘who else have you interviewed’, and depending on the answer the research would be considered legitimate and worth participating. In fact, transparency and striving for impartiality through showing ‘the same face to both militant and government interlocutors and be clear to both that you are not going behind the back of one to talk with the other’ (Keppley, 2001: 534) have facilitated significantly the interviewing process.

Interestingly, not being a member of either of the ethnic communities, be it the national or the regional, can help with trust building with the interviewees, as the researcher is perceived to be more prone to impartiality and not to have any personal or vested interests. During my own fieldtrips in different countries very often this fact appeared to reassure the interviewees and put them at ease. On the other however, the elements of ethnicity and identity are accompanied by pride, and on a number of occasions there were efforts to downplay the conflicts and comments such as ‘What conflict? Many counties have similar conflicts’ were expressed. With the exception of the Israel/Palestine case, in France, Spain and the UK, very often the interviewees would compare their own case with others and would almost always characterise their case as less severe than the others. Given the nature of the research, it was very useful to ask the interviewees if they could recommend anybody else who would be beneficial for the research and would be willing to participate. These recommendations were considered as a

reference and this networking facilitated trust building. This proved to be valuable especially when interviewing in closed ethnic communities where individuals would be particularly protective of their security, and where external trust was very low. In point of fact, there were interviewees who expressed reservations to participate in the research unless the interview was face to face. This was experienced especially in the Basque country.

On the issue of trust and rapport building with the interviewees, if the purpose of an interview is to bring the researcher as close to the truth as possible it is useful, although quite challenging, to apply what Rogers (2003) called accurate empathic understanding. That is, the ability to deeply understand the subjective world of the interviewees. This does not mean agreeing with what the interviewees are saying, but understanding their experiences, feelings, and ‘where they are coming from’ in an accurate way. The researcher recognises that the interviewees’ experiences are subjective and therefore tries to see things from their unique perspective, without at the same time losing sight of impartiality. On a practical level, accurate empathic understanding allows the interviewees to see the researcher as a human who is genuinely interested in the conflict that is being examined rather than a researcher who is purely transactional and only interested in data. Given that fieldtrips are time constricted this approach can facilitate rapport building and lead to more fruitful conversations between the co-participants and the researcher. A ‘how to’ of accurate empathic understanding is for researchers to convey their understanding by reflecting the interviewees’ experience back to them. This can help with confidence building and encourages the interviewees to become more relaxed, more reflective, and willing to share information.

To reiterate, empathy does not mean sympathy towards the armed actors, but rather this accurate empathic understanding becomes a channel through which collected data is filtered in order to become intelligible and also to bring the researcher closer to fulfilling the research aims. When taking the interview it is not the time to be antagonistic with the interviewees and to try and correct them or make them see the error of their ways. There is time and space for that at different stages of the research output. After all in the age of social media and easy access to the public members of organisations and participants in violent ethnic conflict do not really have to grant any academic interview, which is usually lengthier than other interviews and takes longer to see any outcome out of it. As such researchers are required to be willing to negotiate meanings with their co-participants, the interviewees, in order to create shared meanings (Toros, 2016: 52).

In point of fact, ethnographic approaches in terrorism studies, because of their emphasis on the human element and the need to observe and actually interact in their real life environment with the research's protagonists, who are the above mentioned co-participants, have been questioned about their morality (O'Brien, 1995). In this sense, studies in terrorism appear to have the uniqueness of starting from the assumption that real and in depth knowledge of the subject is not possible and for some not even desirable because to observe and talk to terrorists is seen as granting them legitimacy and approval for their actions. The challenge is to show accurate empathy without losing sight of objectivity, and to adopt what could be a subjective research approach for objective findings. These challenges and contradictions can lead to knowledge that may refute or verify established truths about terrorism and political violence and its resolution.

Language and Cultural Awareness

A great facilitator in interviews on a practical and on an accurate empathetic level has proven to be linguistic skills, as well as cultural and personal awareness. Empirically, the importance of knowing the language from the cases examined, appears to be even more prominent in ethnonational and identity conflicts, as for instance demands for regional languages' rights always have a place on the socio-political agendas of independentists. On a practical level knowing the language eliminates the need for a translator with all the complexities this entails, and also helps build rapport as it is often perceived by the interviewee that the researcher has a genuine interest in the situation under investigation. After all, if a researcher aims to become an expert in the field, why not invest in learning the language.

As part of the accurate empathic understanding and language, if the endgame is to gather data and information the lexicon has to be adapted and in the same conflict certain words can be used with some conflicting parties but not with others. As Dolnik (2011: 27) argues 'the purpose is to make the subject feel "heard"... especially with people who see themselves as self-defending victims and who frame their involvement in terrorism as the "only way to be heard".' It would be of limited or no benefit at all if researchers were not prepared to adjust the language in the interviews. Addressing the interviewees as terrorists for instance, irrespective if it is a fitting term or not, will not even get the researcher past the first hurdle of just talking to them to request an interview. From their perspective they speak for the regional nation, and they claim to be the authentic voice of the specific regional culture, from where they appear to

obtain their legitimacy. Subsequently, they would never consider themselves as terrorists, and trying to persuade them otherwise during the interviews, would simply be pointless and counterproductive regarding the aim of the interview. If researchers want to investigate and comprehend the phenomenon of ethnonational terrorism, then they have to acknowledge that a great deal of political violence occurs from its practitioners' strong belief that they possess a moral high ground, what they often refer to as 'just cause'.

How terms are written in the final product will be up to the researcher. During every interview there would be a resounding statement that 'we are not the terrorists, the state is'. In the words of Fanon (1963:1ff) 'it is the colonist who fabricated and who continues to fabricate the colonised subject'. The members of violent political organisations would defend their *raison d'être* as that of correcting an injustice of the past, in this case the assimilation of the ethnic community and region by the central state. Consequently those involved in ethnic political violence perceive their actions as justified by causes that have a higher moral imperative.

Conclusion

An ethnographic research in terrorist studies has the beauty and challenges of researching topics based on a concept that nobody really agrees on or no one can define lucidly, involving subjects of research that become co-participants but nobody can access easily, focusing on life and death issues, whose impact nobody ignores.

Political violence is not something alien to human experience, but is part of it. As such it needs to be studied and to be understood exactly in the same way as other political aspects of human experience are studied and become understood. It is not naivety but rather hard pragmatism that makes a researcher seek interviews and to interact with the research's key protagonists of violent ethnic conflicts. Ethnographic approaches encourage researchers to engage directly with their research subjects at a human level but not in the sense of condoning their actions. To this end for ethnographic methodologies, fieldwork and interviews provide a pivotal source. This direct engagement in combination with the multi-faceted nature of ethnographic approaches leads researchers to break the simplistic and therefore false dichotomy of us versus them. Through the use of pragmatic empathy researchers can obtain an understanding of the in

depth causes of the phenomenon of terrorism with the purpose of tackling it as effectively as possible.

References

Alderdice, J. (2005). Headed the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland at the all-party talks, personal interview, London, 9 April 2005.

Bourdieu, P. (1996) 'Understanding', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13 (2): 17-37.

Clifford, J. (1988) *Predicament of Culture: twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Donlik, A. (2011) 'Conducting field research on terrorism: a brief primer', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 5(2). <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/dolnik-conducting-field-research/287> accessed 24 September 2020

English, R. (2019) 'Nationalism and Terrorism' in E. Chenoweth, R. English, A. Gofas, S. Kalyvas (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 268-282.

English, R. (ed) (2015) *Illusions of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Filippidou, A. (2007) 'Negotiating Tactics in Low Intensity Conflicts: The Cases of Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and Corsica', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 7 (3): 94-108.

Filippidou, A. (2020) 'The Impact of Forced Top-Down Nation Building on Conflict Resolution: Lessons from the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and turkey'. *Nationalities Papers*, 48(1), 144-157

Jackson, R., Jarvis, L., Gunning, J., and Breen-Smyth, M. (2011) *Terrorism: a critical introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jenkins, P. (2003) *Images of Terror: what we can and can't know about terrorism*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Keppley Mahmood, C. (2001) 'Terrorism, Myth, and the Power of Ethnographic Praxis', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 30(5): 520-545

O'Brien, C.C. (1995). *On the Eve of the Milenium: the future of democracy through the age of unreason*. New York: Free Press.

Poggioli, P. (2015) *Après l'adieu aux armes Irlande, Pays Basque, Corse*. Ajaccio: Fiara Éditions.

Robben, A.C.G.M and Nordstrom, C. (1995) 'The anthropology and ethnography of violence and sociopolitical conflict', in C. Nordstrom and A.C.G.M Robben (eds), *Fieldwork under Fire: contemporary studies of violence and survival*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp.1-23.

Rogers, C. (2003) *Client-Centered Therapy: its current practice, implications and theory* (London: Constable & Robinson)

Said, E. (1997) *Covering Islam*. London: Vintage.

Silke, A. (2004) *Research on Terrorism*. London: Frank Cass.

Stern, M. (2006) 'Racism, Sexism, Classism and Much More: reading security-identity in marginalised sites', in B. Ackerly, M. Stern, and J. True (eds) *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Toros, H. (2016) '*Terrorists as Co-participants?*' in Priya Dixit and Jacob L. Stump, *Critical Methods in Terrorism Studies*. London: Routledge

Weigert, H. (1942) *Generals and Geographers: The Twilight of Geopolitics*. London: Oxford University Press.



DSPACE

<https://dspace.org/>

Chapter 7: Ethnographic approaches in terrorism studies and research

Filippidou, Anastasia

2023-02-28

Edward Elgar Publishing

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789909104.00013>

Filippidou A (2023) Ethnographic approaches in terrorism studies and research. In: A research agenda for terrorism studies, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, pp. 107-118.