

# Qualitative Research Interviews and the Study of National Security Intelligence

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**Abstract:** This article explores the rationales for using interviews as a research method to study national security intelligence, and provides a step-by-step guide for researchers to prepare, conduct, and use interviews in research fields limited by government secrecy. The epistemological and methodological challenges posed by qualitative interviews in the field of intelligence studies are not fundamentally different from those faced in the broader field of international relations. However, government secrecy exacerbates these challenges and increases the need to carefully design and conduct interviews in intelligence research. Scholars of international relations can draw lessons from the best practices of intelligence researchers to overcome these challenges. At the same time, contemporary methodological and epistemological developments in the field of international relations have the potential to broaden the study of intelligence.

**Resumen:** Este artículo explica las razones que avalan el uso de las entrevistas como método de investigación para analizar la inteligencia de seguridad nacional. Además, incluye una guía paso a paso para que los investigadores puedan preparar, realizar y usar las entrevistas en áreas de investigación limitadas por el secreto gubernamental. Los desafíos epistemológicos y metodológicos que representan las entrevistas cualitativas en el área de los estudios de inteligencia no difieren, en esencia, de los que representa el amplio campo de las relaciones internacionales. Sin embargo, el secreto gubernamental intensifica dichos desafíos e incrementa la necesidad de diseñar y realizar con cuidado las entrevistas destinadas a la investigación de inteligencia. Los estudiosos de las relaciones internacionales pueden aprender de la labor realizada por los investigadores de inteligencia para superar esos desafíos. Al mismo tiempo, los desarrollos metodológicos y epistemológicos de la época contemporánea en el campo de las relaciones internacionales tienen el potencial de expandir el estudio de inteligencia.

**Keywords:** methodology, epistemology, qualitative research interview, national security, intelligence studies

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Since the origins of the field of intelligence studies in the 1950s, a few years after Bernard Brodie (1949) famously called for a more scientific treatment of strategy, scholars have researched empirical evidence on the conduct of national security and intelligence in various settings, focusing mostly on Western government practices (Johnson 2013, 4–9; Van Puyvelde and Curtis 2016). To learn about national security, researchers working outside of government have developed explorative projects based on fragments of evidence discovered in publicly available government documents, memoirs, private papers, and through interviews (Hughes, Jackson, and Scott 2008; Hughes 2008). The paucity of sources on secret

government practices has shaped the study of national security, posing a number of methodological and epistemological challenges that are explored in this article.

Research in intelligence studies has been significantly affected by the secrecy that characterizes national security (Jackson 2008, 3). Government intelligence archives are only available in select democratic countries, and even there many documents remain unavailable. Government intelligence activities themselves often rely on fragile sources and methods to acquire and understand information about perceived threats. Warner (2007, 17), an intelligence historian working for the US government, notes that disclosing these sources and methods can provide an informational, analytical, or operational advantage to a rival. As a result, governments prefer to keep a significant part of their intelligence activities secret, and severely punish unauthorized disclosures of information. The case of former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer John Kiriakou—who served prison time after pleading guilty to one count of passing classified information to the media—offers a stark reminder of the risks insiders take when they decide to disclose sensitive government information without authorization. Current and former national security professionals need to be extremely careful regarding what they can and cannot disclose to outsiders, and they often prefer not to discuss their work with academic researchers.

This article explores how secrecy shapes national security research to better understand the limits of scholarly knowledge in this field, identify strategies to mitigate these limits, and communicate research findings effectively. The core of the article focuses on the use of qualitative research interviews as a data collection method in the field of intelligence studies. A frequently cited, though outdated and possibly inaccurate, estimate suggests that around “90 percent of all social science investigations use interview” data (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 1).<sup>1</sup> Interviewing has long been a prominent data collection strategy in intelligence studies, though not used as frequently as this estimate suggests. A systematic review of all the research articles published from 1986 to 2016 in *Intelligence and National Security*, the flagship journal in intelligence studies, shows that researchers conducted and referred to their interviews in 15 percent of all the articles published.<sup>2</sup> Despite the widespread use and importance of this method, very little has been written on the challenges of interviewing in national security research. To fill this gap, the article addresses methodological questions relating to the engagement with interviewees as primary sources, and related epistemological concerns with notions of bias and validity.

The first section explores why interviews are useful to study intelligence and emphasizes some of the limitations of this method. The article discusses best practices to inform researchers’ decisions regarding whom to interview and how to conduct interviews effectively. The sensitive nature of the objects of intelligence studies requires careful preparation and follow-up to protect the subjects, that is to say the intelligence practitioners and researchers. Scholars must solve a number of methodological and logistical puzzles not only before but also during and after their data collection effort. While most of these puzzles are not unique to the study of intelligence and national security, they are exacerbated in this field given the sensitive nature of the issues being researched. Specifically, the secrecy surrounding intelligence practices limits research opportunities and influences key methodological choices regarding whom to interview, how to interview, and how to use interview data. Maintaining an awareness of these limits and developing strategies to mitigate or even exploit them is essential to maximize the potential of qualitative research

<sup>1</sup>This claim can be traced to Brenner (1981, 115).

<sup>2</sup>A database of all the articles published in *Intelligence and National Security*, including those that use interview as a data collection method, is on file with the author and available on request. The other flagship journal in the field, the *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* was not included in this database because articles published in this venue do not systematically follow academic conventions regarding citation. Given its centrality to the field, *Intelligence and National Security* can be considered to be representative of broader trends in the field of intelligence studies.

interviews and provide robust contributions to the literature. International relations scholars can learn from the challenges confronted by intelligence scholars and the way in which they have strived to identify, protect, and corroborate their sources. At the same time, developments in international relations and cognate fields can help intelligence researchers develop new approaches to data collection and analysis.

While many epistemological approaches to interviews exist, the dichotomy between positivism and constructivism provides a reference point throughout this article (Miller and Glassner 1997, 99; Gubrium and Holstein 2002, 83). On the one hand, positivists seek to record facts to mirror an external reality. This approach, which most intelligence scholars have adopted, tends to consider interviews as sources of witness accounts. The main concern from this perspective is to ensure that questioning yields reliable and valid data (Holstein and Gubrium 1997, 117). Positivists use standardized procedures to control the interview and extract unaltered knowledge from informants. On the other hand, constructivists criticize the myth of value-free scientific inquiry and emphasize how the knowledge gleaned from interviews is necessarily situated. From their perspective, interviewers co-produce data with their interviewees and do not merely to glean information from them (Hammersley 2003; Kezar 2003; Conti and O'Neil 2007). Constructivism offers a different set of lenses for intelligence scholars to prepare, conduct, and exploit qualitative interviews. Using these lenses can diversify intelligence research in a way that will both inform the public debate on the role of intelligence in contemporary societies and build bridges between intelligence studies and international relations.

### Why Use Qualitative Research Interviews to Study of Intelligence?

Primary sources are generally considered the gold standard of social sciences research. While data sources vary, students of government often rely on documents and interviews to collect primary data and unearth processes and practices that have not received enough attention in the literature. Both types of data sources—documents and interviews—present substantial challenges of accessibility and validity in the field of intelligence studies.

In select Western democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, publicly available documentation accessible online or in government archives offers a wealth of data about intelligence organizations, practices, products, and failings. Despite Western governments' transparency efforts (see for example Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2016), the study of intelligence is undeniably marked by severe data constraints. Notwithstanding this, information about intelligence programs and activities often becomes public when they meet some hurdles. The failure of the US intelligence community to prevent the 9/11 terror attacks and the inability of the French intelligence and security services to prevent the 2015 Paris attacks led to the publication of government reports disclosing information on national intelligence practices (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004; Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016). The unauthorized disclosures of classified information orchestrated by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden in 2013 is another case in point, this time of forced transparency (Johnson et al. 2014).

While commissions of inquiry investigating intelligence failures and leaks of sensitive government information have provided much material to intelligence scholars, they do not, on their own, provide an exhaustive basis for research. Government reports tailored for public dissemination generally tell a story that is constrained by political and bureaucratic imperatives. May and Zelikow (2005, 208), who both served on the 9/11 commission staff, state that the final report of that commission muted some interpretations to avoid "the appearance of partisan tilt." For Pillar (2006, 1022), the US national intelligence officer for Near East and South Asia

from 2000 to 2005, “the commission staff used such techniques as highly selective use of material, partial truths, irrelevant references, plays on words, quotations out of context, and suggestive language leading to false inferences to portray as weak what had been a strong strategic analytical performance.” In another register, the Snowden leaks, despite their extensive scope, did not provide a complete account of the practices of the National Security Agency and its partners. The point is not to discard the importance of these sources but to emphasize their situated nature. Rigorous scholarship exhausts publicly accessible sources such as government documents, private papers and memoirs, media reports, and secondary literature to fill the gaps in each source’s story and provide a more exhaustive account of a research subject. In this context, interviews can provide another window into diverse and complex intelligence practices.

Interviews can help fill knowledge gaps and generate new understandings of intelligence practices. Information about intelligence services is notoriously sparse. Official documents available online and at national archives are limited in scope and availability because government officials sanitize public records to protect intelligence sources and methods. Aldrich (2003, 6) points out that government officials’ ability to select what is made public and what is destroyed provides “ample scope to massage the representation of the more secretive aspects of government.” This reinforces the need to corroborate information gleaned from archival sources to confirm and contextualize documentary evidence. The traditional approach to interviewing in intelligence studies is positivist and highlights how interviews can help fill the information gaps left by publicly available documentary sources. From this perspective, interviewing insiders can enrich and sometimes contrast the story the government tells through its archives and the publication of authorized histories (Andrew 2009; Baxter and Jeffery 2013). Researchers can use interviews in combination with public records and memoirs, for example, to provide a more exhaustive account of a phenomenon. In this approach, qualitative research interviews complement a strategy of triangulation through which the researcher cross-references different data sources and data types (Davies 2001, 77–78). However, the declassification of sensitive government documents often occurs between thirty and fifty years after they were written. As a result, many of the officials with first-hand knowledge of these documents might not be alive anymore, or might not remember specific documents and the events surrounding them (Aldrich 2002, 14). Scholars using interviews have to be particularly cautious about how they approach and use this data collection method.

For outside researchers seeking to understand national security, interviews can be a useful tool to clarify the practices and inner workings of the national security state beyond the information available on paper (Davies 2001, 74; Lilleker 2003, 208). This is particularly the case when interviewees are honest and forthright, and when they have had first-hand knowledge of the activities being discussed. In this best-case scenario, qualitative interviews might reveal a mix of facts and beliefs that inform the researcher’s understanding of a phenomenon. Constructivist scholars tend to use interviews to learn about individual beliefs, perceptions, and preferences. Their approach embraces some of the limits of interviews to examine how reality is constructed and represented during interviews. From this perspective, interviews can assist researchers who want to reveal how insiders create and sustain government intelligence and security practices, thus defining the object of intelligence studies (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006).

Regardless of the epistemological approach favored by the researcher, interviews are not a silver bullet. National security professionals are constrained by legal restrictions on divulging protected or classified information. Regulations limit what they can discuss, even in retirement, and this affects the potential value of interviews depending on the subject of discussion. Interviews are only as reliable as their narrators whose reminiscences and memories can be treacherous. Interviewees can

get it wrong and not remember events or practices accurately because of memory lapses, personal attitudes, and political preferences. In a 1993 publication, [Murphy \(1993, 102\)](#), a former CIA station chief in Berlin and chief of the agency's Soviet Russia division, criticized a series of books published on American intelligence and the US ability to verify arms limitation agreements, noting that:

The information contained in these books is derived from interviews from retired CIA and FBI officials so that much of it is hearsay covering events that occurred decades ago. Thus, it reflects the inevitable distortion caused by memory lapses, often colored by personal attitudes. In many cases, the statements on individuals and events contained in these books are simply not true.

Insiders can be driven by self-serving motives and practice selective disclosure to present themselves in a good light, protect themselves from liability in the event of an intelligence failure, or disclose negative information about a rival unit or organization for bureaucratic, political, or personal reasons. For example, [Shelton \(2011, 37\)](#) notes that national security professionals who participated or have knowledge of political assassinations “might feel compelled to prevaricate on their true responsibility.”

For intelligence historian [Jeffreys-Jones \(2008, 271\)](#), “Oral interviews with governmental figures fall roughly into the category of official memoir. Like other memoirists, the interviewee can be expected to put the best possible spin in his period of office, and to withhold information that might embarrass him, or discredit his motives.” A recent example is *Playing to the Edge*, the memoir of former NSA and CIA director [Michael Hayden \(2016\)](#). Following publication of this memoir, the vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Senator [Dianne Feinstein \(2016\)](#), released a summary pointing out dozens of “factual errors and other problems.” Feinstein’s rebuttal provides a stark reminder that researchers should maintain a healthy dose of skepticism when analyzing the accounts of serving and former officials, especially when they justify or praise themselves and criticize others. These examples do not prove that interviews and memoirs are useless sources of information. Rather, they should encourage researchers to exercise caution and find ways to gauge the quality and validity of their sources. For constructivists, such discrepancies reveal how interviews are co-produced between a source and its audience, between an interviewee and an interviewer, or a writer and his or her readers ([Manjikian 2015, 709–710](#)). Here, the meaning of interviews and the knowledge they generate is socially constituted, it stems, from a specific context that needs to be analyzed and conveyed to the readers ([Holstein and Gubrium 1997, 113–114](#); [Hammersley 2003, 123](#)).

### Whom to Interview?

The objectives and research questions driving a project are the best reference points to determine whom to interview and how to do so. Interviews in the field of intelligence studies have largely focused on government elites, following what [Hammond \(2015, 313\)](#) calls a “top-down tradition.” Elite interviewing is particularly relevant in the study of intelligence because intelligence is created for the consumption of senior decision makers ([Davies 2001, 76](#); [Warner 2002, 17–18](#)). Senior officials have first-hand experience of important events and processes and can be expected to be familiar with key pieces of information. These officials are often interviewed after they leave government, when they have more time to engage with researchers and more latitude to share select pieces of information and opinions with outsiders. Occasionally, scholars are able to interview serving senior officials. [Johnson \(2015, 1–25\)](#), for instance, interviewed then US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in his office. Such interviews provide current and topical material and

great opportunities for on-site observation, but serving officials might not be able to discuss issues and share personal views as freely as their retired colleagues. Their answers are often prepared in advance and reviewed by the public affairs office.

The prominence of interviews with senior officials limits our understanding of national security practices. Elites should not only be construed as senior officials but more broadly as persons who have the “ability to exert influence” thanks to their intellectual and social capital (Harvey 2011, 473). Most if not all intelligence practitioners can be considered members of the elite because of their relatively unique knowledge and experiences. Various mid-level and entry-level professionals also contribute to national security processes and policies, and constitute valuable sources to understand government security practices beyond the institutionalized view from the top. In many cases, these lower ranking officials are more likely to have first-hand experience of specific events or processes under study, and would therefore constitute more credible sources. Researchers have much to gain from interviewing a variety of stakeholders to learn about their different perspectives. The main problem is to identify and get access to a variety of actors who often prefer to fly under the radar. Depending on the specific subject of study, interviewing outsiders who research or publicly write about national security intelligence can also provide relevant information and open doors (Hammond 2015, 323). Publications on democratic intelligence accountability have, for instance, relied on interviews with congressional staffers, journalists, and members of public interest groups to shed light on the role of intelligence in democracies (Van Puyvelde 2013).

A recent movement of diversification in the field of intelligence studies calls for researchers to engage with intelligence practices outside of the Anglosphere (Aldrich and Kasuku 2012; Van Puyvelde and Curtis 2016, 1048–1049). Interviewing sources outside of Anglophone countries is fraught with difficulties—including in terms of access, lack of background literature and knowledge about different intelligence cultures, and research ethics—that remain poorly understood in the field of intelligence studies. Yet pursuing such sources will allow researchers to open new avenues of research that will improve our understanding of different intelligence cultures and practices, in the same way scholars of diplomacy have done in the last decade (Neumann 2002, 627–630; Pouliot and Cornut 2015, 298–303).

Once categories of potential interviewees have been identified, further methodological questions arise to decide whom to interview. Scientific approaches to research often rely on sampling to select cases and subjects that are representative of a wider universe. In intelligence studies, systematic sampling has thus far remained very rare. Outside researchers do not have enough access to information to identify all the employees of an agency or a specific unit at a certain point in time. Random sampling risks excluding important respondents, whom researchers cannot afford to overlook in a field marked by a very limited access to information (Tansy 2007, 765). One notable exception is Coulthart’s (2016, 947–948) survey of the use of structured analytic techniques at the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) at the US State Department. By and large, intelligence scholars have relied on purposive sampling to select their sources, interviewing specific individuals they are particularly keen to hear from because of their participation in specific events and processes. In general, the population of interviewees that is identified and willing to be interviewed is so small that intelligence scholars are forced to rely on convenience sampling, interviewing whomever they manage to obtain an interview with. Government secrecy often prevents the use of refined methodological frameworks and limits the external validity of the findings made in intelligence studies.

Identifying potential interviewees can prove particularly challenging for outside researchers. Unlike other public organizations, intelligence and security agencies protect their employees’ identity, except for the most senior officials. Consequently, finding officials with first-hand knowledge of a specific issue or event can be particularly difficult. Yet, various techniques exist to identify potential interviewees.

The name of senior intelligence officials, especially those of agency directors and their assistants, are often publicly available. In most modern democracies, these officials appear in the media to explain their agencies' policies and testify at parliamentary hearings to justify their actions. A simple Internet search for the name of former directors and deputy directors of the Central Intelligence Agency will reveal that some of them are now teaching at US universities inside and around the beltway, and have publicly available university email addresses. Others work in the private sector and their company email addresses are publicly available. The home address of former senior officials can sometimes be found in phone books and specialized publications like the *International Who's Who*. Professional networking websites offer another venue to identify and contact serving and former intelligence officers working at all levels. A LinkedIn search for "Central Intelligence Agency" reveals 778 results, though searches for other agencies like the French *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure* or the British Secret Intelligence Service return no result. Dozens of former Western intelligence officers have developed a strong presence on social media networking sites like Twitter. Identifying potential interviewees is one thing, getting them to reply to requests for interviews is quite another, especially if they are contacted out of the blue.

Obtaining interviews with national security professionals often relies on networking. In the United States, various serving and retired officers—mostly working at the mid- and senior levels—attend academic and professional conferences that are open to the public including the International Studies Association annual convention. The events organized by the International Association for Intelligence Education, the Intelligence and National Security Alliance, the National Military Intelligence Association, and the Strategic and Competitive Intelligence Professionals association regularly bring together professionals of all ranks and some academics. Associations of retirees like the Association of Former Intelligence Officers can also help identify potential interviewees. Seminar series like those organized by the METIS research group on intelligence in democratic societies at Sciences-Po Paris and the *Association pour les Études sur la Guerre et la Stratégie* in France, and the Cambridge Seminar in Intelligence, or the events held at the Royal United Services Institute in the United Kingdom provide similar opportunities to get a foot in the door. Using a strategy of snowballing—asking each interviewee to recommend and introduce the researcher to one or more other sources—can help identify additional interviewees and open doors. Snowballing is particularly well suited to the study of national security because the population of interest is often invisible to outside researchers (Tansey 2007, 770–771).

Researchers can then adopt different strategies, based on the positions of the respondents, to decide on the order of their interviews. One strategy starts with individuals on the periphery of the agencies—retirees, journalists, and other experts—to then identify and target low- and mid-level employees and finally senior officials involved in specific governmental processes. Starting from the periphery can help build a solid knowledge base to keep the most important questions for later interviews with senior officials. On the other hand, interviewing senior officials first can indicate to other serving and former employees working at all levels that a research project is serious and worthy of engagement. Given their access, senior officials can also help identify lower ranking colleagues with more specialized knowledge and different experiences. Oftentimes, availability, convenience, and chance, more than a specific research strategy, affect the interviews order and access to key informants.

### How to Prepare an Interview?

Once the researcher has identified a pool of interviewees and decided on a strategy, a host of methodological and logistical issues still need to be addressed before field

research can start. Simply chatting with insiders is unlikely to elicit valid or useful information from them. Conducting exhaustive research on the interviewee's biography will help to understand her or his background to ensure that he or she has first-hand knowledge of the issues being studied. This initial research on the interviewee and his or her milieu will subsequently help eliminate irrelevant questions, inform strategies to build rapport, and interpret the significance of what the interviewee might say.

The researcher also needs to decide whether to conduct structured, semi-structured, unstructured interviews, or a mix of these formats. The epistemology of structured interviews tends to be positivist. These interviews rely on a standardized set of questions that frames interactions with interviewees. This type of interview can, for instance, take the form of a questionnaire survey like the one used by [Coulthart \(2016\)](#) to investigate the use of analytic techniques at the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). The context and process of structured interviews is repeated in the exact same manner with all the interviewees to ensure that results can be aggregated reliably. Questions need to be clear and specific enough for the sources to respond to them effectively. Structured interviews standardize the data collection process and make it easier to compare answers from one interviewee to another. When interviews are structured enough, a quantitative analysis can be applied to the collected data. This type of approach has become relatively common in political science and public administration (see for example [Aberbach and Rockman 2002](#), 675; [Groeneveld et al. 2015](#)), but has never been used in intelligence studies. The pre-determined character of structured interviews limits the discovery of new and potentially relevant information that is initially overlooked by the researcher. This risk is particularly important in the field of intelligence studies where information is often shrouded in secrecy. The relatively small pools of interviewees that are accessible in intelligence studies also limit the potential for quantitative research.

In-depth interviews are more common in intelligence studies. Their prominence can be explained by the paucity of publicly available information on intelligence practices and practitioners and the exploratory approach adopted by most researchers in the field. In-depth interviews can either be unstructured or semi-structured. Unstructured interviews take the form of open conversations with one or more respondents. The researcher prepares a list of issues to discuss ahead of the interview and gives the interviewee(s) plenty of latitude to drive the discussion. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher prepares a list of questions that he or she plans to ask to the respondent. The interviewer might ask further questions and probe the respondent as the interview unfolds to gather more information on replies that seem particularly significant. This type of interview imposes some standardization, but leaves the door open for the conversation to digress and possibly reveal new issues and angles. Unstructured and semi-structured interviews require more attention from the interviewer to keep the conversation in line with the research objectives, and more work afterwards to transcribe and make sense of the interview data.

[Aberbach and Rockman \(2002\)](#) identify three considerations in deciding on the type of interview: the degree of prior research, the need for validity, and the receptivity of respondents. First, when significant prior research exists on a subject, the researcher is more likely to have sufficient knowledge to design refined, closed-ended questions to be used in a more structured interview. Second, open-ended questions—most frequently used in semi-structured interviews—give more leeway to the respondents who can share their knowledge based on their own cognitive frameworks. These are well suited for exploratory and constructivist projects ([Gubrium and Holstein 2002](#), 83). Third, some respondents might prefer to articulate their views rather than being limited by close-ended questions. Time constraints can also require the use of a semi-structured format to keep the discussion focused on key



topics. [Aberbach and Rockman \(2002, 674\)](#) conclude that concerns with reliability should drive the choice of method and not the pressures to produce “an analytically rigorous treatment of less reliable and informative data.” It is worth noting that positivist and constructivist scholars approach reliability in different ways. In the positivist understanding, reliability is “the extent to which questioning yields the same answers whenever and wherever it is carried out” ([Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 9](#)). For constructivists like [Holstein and Gubrium \(1997, 117\)](#) “one cannot simply expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production.” From this perspective, reliability should not determine how researchers design their interviews.

Once the approach and the type of interview have been identified, the time has come for the researcher to contact potential interviewees. Drafting an effective message which will lead to a positive reply requires preparation. This initial message should provide an honest and brief overview of the research project and situate the role of the respondent in this context. Given the sensitive nature of national security practices, explaining that one is not looking for any sensitive government information and offering confidentiality can help increase response rates. [Aberbach and Rockman \(2002, 674\)](#) advise researchers “to be persistent and to insist firmly, but politely (and with a convincing explanation) that no one but the person sampled, i.e., the principal, will do for the interview.” Intelligence researchers would be well advised not to insist too firmly. National security practitioners who accept to participate in an interview take a risk. They have more to lose than their interviewer if they stray into sensitive areas not approved for public dissemination. Once an initial message is ready, the researcher needs to consider how to contact the source. While sending an interview request by email is common, some interviewees might prefer to be contacted by written letter, by phone, or even face-to-face during professional events and other social gatherings. Understanding the status of the source, and his or her cultural setting will inform this decision and help negotiate access effectively. [Lilleker \(2003, 209\)](#) contacted British members of parliament by letter, but a letter would be unlikely to yield results when approaching a Mexican law enforcement officer, an American civil rights activist, or a Danish journalist.

When a respondent agrees to an interview, a number of practical parameters still need to be agreed upon. Will the interview take place in person, by telephone, or by email? A face-to-face interview, in person interview, or via video chat, provides opportunities to directly observe the respondent’s body language, which might grant additional clues. Interviewing a source within his or her work environment can provide further information regarding his or her professional status and identity ([Elwood and Martin 2000](#)). However, interviewing intelligence practitioners in their office often is impossible. Intelligence is inherently secretive and it is relatively rare for any non-professional to be granted access to an intelligence facility. Researchers and reporters are, sometimes, allowed in these facilities, most often to meet with senior leaders, but those instances are tightly controlled and coordinated. Foreign researchers are even more likely to be refused access to intelligence facilities and to struggle to get access to serving intelligence officials because they tend to be perceived as security risks. When meeting interviewees in their work environment is not an option, public spaces, preferably quiet ones, are the typical fall back option. Meeting outside of the work environment sometimes feels more appropriate to the interviewee and can provide additional guarantees of confidentiality. In any case, the choice of location is an important variable that can affect participants’ decisions about the information they are willing to share. Throughout the life of a project, respondents might express patterns of preferences regarding interview sites that will inform the researcher about his or her interviewees’ identity and milieu ([Elwood and Martin 2000, 654](#)).

Researchers and interviewees sometimes agree to interact over the phone. In such cases, the researcher will still be able to hear intonations and direct reactions from

the interviewee, but observing body language and the surroundings will not be possible. Some opportunities to control the interview and its environment through non-verbal clues will also be lost (Stephens 2007, 211–213). Establishing rapport—a key to allow the respondent to speak openly, truthfully, and extensively (Baker 1997, 130)—without eye contact is also harder. Finally, more structured interviews can be conducted via email or letter. This method provides more flexibility for the interviewee to prepare his or her responses, which might then lack in spontaneity. Visual and auditory sources of information are lost when corresponding with informants, as well as some opportunities to digress and uncover unexpected but relevant memories and opinions. For these reasons, most qualitative researchers prefer to conduct face-to-face interviews when they can afford to do so.

The next step is to determine a list of topics or questions, so that the respondent is not questioned aimlessly. Interview questions generally seek to fill knowledge gaps in the literature, but how they do so depends on the preferred approach. In the positivist approach, the interviewer seeks to establish facts or, confirm or deny hypotheses about specific events, processes, and policies that are relevant to the project. Constructivists tend to be less concerned with facts and more flexible in their approach to questioning. Holstein and Gubrium (1997, 121–123) conceive of interviews as an active process during which the interviewer might improvise questions and make sense of their meaning afterwards. A constructivist line of questioning typically includes elements of self-reflection, encouraging respondents to articulate feelings and meanings about their experiences, to reflect critically on different points of view and their own situation rather than repeating the official line (Miller and Glassner 1997, 105; Tang 2002, 706; Kezar 2003, 410; Riach 2009, 359–360). Pragmatist researchers, who draw inspiration from both positivism and constructivism, prefer to develop questions that seek to establish facts and explore feelings and representations.

A typical set of interview questions might start with a biographical question to establish the interviewee's expertise and shed light on past experiences. Open-ended questions on the concepts examined by the research project should be asked early on to leave enough time to satisfyingly answer them. One useful but time-consuming technique is free-recall listing, which asks informants to list all they can think of on a given topic (Johnson and Weller 2002, 503). More pointed questions probing the memory of the interviewee can follow. To generate reactions from the interviewee and orient the discussions, some researchers share copies of archival documents or press clippings with their interviewees. Some scholars also advise to keep sensitive and difficult questions for the end of the interview to minimize their impact on the discussion in case they irritate the interviewee. Interviewers should also keep some time at the end of the interview for the informant to answer questions off-the-record. This is particularly important in national security research where respondents tend to be more concerned about what they can and should not say. Answer to questions off-the-record cannot be mentioned as such in the research but they often help frame and contextualize the research.

Positionality, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, is a key factor affecting the effectiveness of interviews as a research method. The positivist approach to interview research considers the interviewee as a repository of data to be collected by an interviewer that strives for neutrality. From this perspective researchers should refrain from exposing their views even when prompted so that they do not influence the respondent or contaminate his or her responses. A number of scholars have distanced themselves from this approach and recognize that questions inevitably steer the interview, reveal the researcher's agenda, and constrain the participants' responses. Constructivists put an emphasis on the role of the researcher in shaping the interview process. For Holstein and Gubrium (1997, 119), the interviewer should display a "willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts" to build rapport with the interviewee. To document

the researcher's place in the research project and create opportunities for reflexivity, some scholars (Kezar 2003, 406; Riach 2009, 361) recommend using a diary in which the researchers can provide details of his or her relationship with the research project, write down recollections from each interview, and document his or her biases to better take them into account.

Respondents also affect positionality and the interview process. For instance, they are likely to engage differently with different types of interviewers and the questions they ask. Cunningham-Sabot (1999) finds that local elites tend to trust foreign researchers more than their fellow citizens because they are not perceived as a threat to their status. The situation is quite different in the field of intelligence studies where the nationality of an interviewer can cause concerns about his or her intentions. In other cases, the background of the interviewer can facilitate interactions with the interviewee. A respondent who served in the military is likely to perceive an interviewer who served in the same branch to be more trustworthy than a civilian. Whatever the circumstances, researchers should develop in-depth knowledge of the research topic and think carefully about the distance they want to maintain with their interviewees and research project. Being knowledgeable also demonstrates commitment, and facilitates understanding and rapport with the interviewee before, during, and after the interview (Morris 2009, 212–214; Mikecz 2012, 485).

Conducting interviews raises a number of ethical concerns related to the respondents and the researcher (Baele et al. 2017). Institutional requirements, through institutional review boards in the United States, are largely designed to protect respondents. Scholars are asked to provide information to assess the degree to which their research could harm their respondents and develop mitigation strategies to minimize any potential harm. A number of best practices exist to do so, including the preparation of an information sheet summarizing the key objectives of a project and a consent form to be shared with and explained to the respondent ahead of the interview. These formalities provide participants with an opportunity to assess whether they are at ease with the proposed interview process, and if not, to request for changes. For example, respondents could agree to be recorded but ask to review each paragraph in which the researcher will refer to their interview. From the researcher's perspective, recording an interview can reduce data distance—the amount of information lost in the interview process—and provides more room for the researcher to concentrate on what the interviewee is saying. However, using a recorder or even taking notes might make the respondent feel uncomfortable or even put him or her in a risky situation. Some respondents might prefer not to be recorded and not to sign a consent form, or to sign it under an alias, to protect their identity. In these cases, a common practice is to gain oral consent from the interviewee at the start of the interview.

Additional concerns arise more prominently in the field of intelligence studies. While national security professionals can be expected to know and respect their professional obligations and refrain from disclosing sensitive information, they might occasionally share sensitive information, intentionally or not. In this case, the main issue from the researcher's point of view is to protect his source so that the source does not incur any harm. A national security professional that discloses sensitive information to a researcher might breach government policies or even the law, and damage his or her career. Sanctions, including imprisonment, could be enforced even if improperly disclosed material remain only in the interviewer notes and are sourced to an anonymous respondent. US General David Petraeus, a former director of the CIA and Commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, was sentenced to two years of probation and a fine for sharing classified information with his biographer. (US District Court for the Western District of North Carolina 2015). The scandal also significantly affected the career of Petraeus's interviewer and biographer (Bennett 2016). Informants working in undemocratic countries might risk even more than their career and reputation.

Given the risks and sensitivity of the subjects discussed in intelligence research, giving multiple decision points for respondents to determine whether or not they want to engage in an interview and continue their participation is preferable.

Another ethical concern arising specifically in security and conflict research is the possibility to entertain an empathetic relationship with individuals who have committed human rights or civil liberties abuses. This could be the case of a research on torture, or research projects exploring intelligence and security practices in undemocratic or in at-war countries (see for example [Waldman 2010](#)). These sorts of interviews remain extremely rare in intelligence studies, but it is worth asking whether they could legitimize participants who engaged in abusive practices, and risk the wellbeing and sometimes the safety of the researcher.

### Using Interview Material

After the interview, the researcher needs to conduct a number of additional tasks to use the interview material as effectively and ethically as possible. These steps are important because the use of data is one of the main factors determining the quality of a research output. Directly after the interview, researchers should take some time to write down their impressions and review their field notes, if any, to add details and transcribe their interactions while memories are still fresh. Transcribing audio records, when available, is preferable and provides an opportunity for the researcher to ponder on the interview data. Whether or not a recording is available, the researcher should be aware that personal bias and interpretative errors can affect his or her memory and the subsequent transcription and analysis of interviews ([Thies 2002](#); [Poland 2002](#)). Audio records themselves are not analog to reality—they miss a lot of nonverbal clues such as body language and facial expressions, and together with transcripts and notes, they constitute partial and interpretative accounts of past encounters.

At the analytical stage, the information that participants share raises questions of validity and meaningfulness. One of the main concerns with the use of interviews as a data collection method is that interviewees tell the truth as they see it. [Ferris \(1995, 2\)](#) notes that interviewees can manipulate, deceive, and lie to the researcher. They might prefer to discuss specific events and memories over others, or they might only know one side of the story. After all, intelligence itself tends to be based on fallible sources that might have been manipulated by adversary services ([Ben-Israel 1989, 672](#)). A number of criteria can be used to assess the validity of interview data. Researchers can start by considering their interviewee's level of access to the information and phenomena being discussed. Based on this access and on the track record and reputation (if any) of their respondent, they can assess his or her credibility. Interviewers should seek to understand their interviewee's point of view and perceptions, and consider how these might affect their responses. Respondents might have various motives to falsify a story which should also be taken into account. Taking a step back and considering broader questions such as "who is speaking to whom, for what purpose and under what circumstances," ([George and Bennett 2004, 100](#)) will help maintain a critical distance with the respondents. Thorough preparation and in-depth knowledge of documentary evidence can help researchers recognize pieces of information that differ from established facts and other accounts. Examining the internal consistency and the level of detail of an interviewee's account can help identify possible issues of validity. In the positivist tradition, researchers systematically evaluate the plausibility of the responses they obtain and, whenever possible, corroborate information with other data sources, including other interviews and primary documents, to determine the validity of their interviewees' statements ([Johnson, Reynolds, and Mycoff 2008, 343](#)).

Using all these criteria and techniques is unlikely to offer complete certitude that the interview material is valid. Interviews and documents are only fragments of evidence that cannot tell the full story on their own. As Jackson (2008, 9) points out, "it is, in any case, a dubious proposition to assume that we can never know the full story of any historical event. Our understanding of complex historical phenomena is too contingent on the temporal and ideological context in which we operate." This remark points to the largely overlooked potential of constructivist approaches to the study of intelligence. If an interviewee's account of an event differs from other sources, it might still be worth analyzing and using it with the necessary qualifications to highlight alternative perspectives and gaps in a narrative. Such discrepancies can provide opportunities to re-contact the interviewee and ask them to reflect on the interview material (Riach 2009, 364). Even then, not all the evidence gathered through an interview will serve the project, and some data will need to be discarded (Hughes 2008, 848). While a researcher can hardly escape his or her own bias when selecting interview extracts, maintaining an awareness of his or her own position in the field and how this position affects the research project can help identify and minimize the effects of bias.

Researchers use a variety of techniques to incorporate interview material in their writing. Block quotes put a strong emphasis on the interviewee's experience, and are more frequent in ethnographic projects exploring organizational cultures, for instance (see Johnston 2005, 13–16; Nolan 2013, 28–30). Frequent and lengthy quotations can overpower the researcher's voice and limit the amount of analysis. Most qualitative researchers prefer to use short quotations or paraphrase interviewees to summarize key information and prevent interviews from dominating their study. Multiple conventions exist to refer to interview material. Respondents sometimes give their consent for the researcher to refer to them by name, and specify the date and location of the interview. This is most common with retired officers who served at senior levels. These interviewees are used to deal with media and researchers' requests and better placed to share information and personal opinions without damaging their career. Even when an interviewee does not disclose sensitive information, they might be reticent to publicly express their opinions about their work and organization. Respondents might request to see the specific paragraph in which their interview will be mentioned and ask for the citation not to refer to them by name. Such requests can be helpful to the extent that they provide further opportunities to clarify the meaning of what interviewees said. If the researcher did not obtain consent, then the interviews cannot be cited and the information discussed in the interview should not be directly used in the research output, though it can still inform the research.

Given the sensitive nature of national security practices, serving and former practitioners often prefer to speak anonymously. As a result, intelligence researchers have developed various practices to quote anonymous sources. Whenever possible, the researcher should try to describe the occupation of their interviewee and give a sense of their expertise. References can for example mention "a national security expert with experience in Congress," "a former operation officer," or "an intelligence analyst working on Middle Eastern issues in the 1990s." Further anonymity can be provided through the use of nicknames or codes such as Mrs. White, Mr. Blue, informant 1, informant 2, etc. Referring to the specific day, month, year, and the city where the interview took place is preferable. These details will help readers assess the validity of the sources that were consulted and the broader context. Sometimes anonymity can be difficult to maintain if dates and locations are mentioned. There are not so many intelligence officers from a specific unit or agency with knowledge of issue x that met with researcher y on day z. Scholars then refer to "private information," "interview data," "confidential interview," "unattributable" information, and sometimes they avoid attributing sources altogether (see Woodward 1987; Davies 1995, 130; Richelson 1995, 498; Farson 2000, 255). While these

practices protect respondents, they prevent other researchers from independently verifying information especially when confidential interviews are the only sources the author refers to (Brown 2006, 151).

Researchers might need to take additional measures to protect their respondents, especially when they interview sources based in non-democratic countries or discuss particularly sensitive matters (Baele et al. 2017). To protect the identity of their interviewees, researchers can decide not to take note of a name at all, and not to record the interview in any way. A number of technical means, including encryption, can be used to secure the storage and transmission of interview data on computers (Tanczer, McConville, and Maynard 2016, 350–351). However, information stored on computer is always at risk of being disclosed, especially if it needs to be protected from well-resourced nation state actors.

### Conclusion

Qualitative interviews present a number of challenges and opportunities that are not unique to the study of intelligence and national security, but are felt more strongly in a field that is defined by secrecy. Secrecy limits researchers' ability to identify and contact interviewees, and practitioners' ability and willingness to accept interviews. As a result, intelligence scholars are heavily reliant on networking and snowballing to negotiate access to interviewees and rarely use sampling techniques that would allow them to generalize their findings. The paucity of data available about intelligence practices—in comparison to other sub-fields of international relations such as international political economy and diplomatic studies—also limits researchers' ability to corroborate interview data with independent sources. In these conditions, intelligence scholars sometimes have a hard time establishing the validity of their interviewees' claims.

Secrecy binds intelligence professionals with stringent non-disclosure agreements that put significant pressure on them when they were able to accept an interview. Secrecy requirements increase intelligence researchers' ethical responsibility to protect their interviewees. In these conditions, researchers need a solid plan to convince their institutional review board that their project will not pose unacceptable risks to human subjects. They need to educate themselves about government information security requirements, develop a procedure that is flexible enough for their interviewees to talk anonymously, and be able to withdraw from the interview process at any time. Finally, secrecy complicates the ability to build rapport between with interviewees and glean data from them. Beyond the limits government information security requirements impose on interview locations and the content of the discussions, national security professionals live in a distinct sub-culture and tend to have a strong feeling of belonging to their professional community. Interviewers that have not experienced this culture, and especially foreign nationals, are likely to lack some of the subjective knowledge that could help them to build rapport with their interviewees.

Scholars working in other sub-fields of international relations, like international political economy or diplomatic studies, are likely to encounter similar obstacles when they seek to interview World Bank or US State Department officials, who are also bound by secrecy constraints. However, secrecy requirements are generally less pervasive in these organizations and less central to these professions. As a result, identifying and getting access to interviewees, respecting ethical principles of research, and building rapport tend to be less problematic in these fields. While secrecy limits intelligence research—posing a number of epistemological and methodological challenges that have been explored in this article—intelligence researchers have learned to work with and around these limits.

For scholars from other sub-fields of international relations, the situation of intelligence researchers can serve as a useful comparison point that will illuminate

the degree of transparency of the actors and processes they study and their ability to collect data from primary sources. Scholars in other fields can learn from the way in which intelligence researchers have strived to identify networks of interviewees, protect the anonymity of their sources, and triangulate the data they obtained. Intelligence scholars should, in turn, learn from broader developments in international relations. Much intelligence scholarship overlooks constructivism. Yet, constructivist approaches are particularly well suited to the use of interviews in intelligence research. Constructivism provides a solid basis for researchers to explore more diverse ideas of intelligence that will expand the field and create new opportunities to engage with International Relations scholarship. Whatever path researchers decide to take, they will face a number of dilemmas when they prepare, conduct, and use interviews. There is no right answer to these dilemmas, only a number of choices which, when they are carefully weighted, will help scholars situate themselves within the field and develop original contributions to the literature.

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