
Research Note: ‘If I said I trust you, I would be lying’. Reflections and recommendations for conducting interviews with (violent) extremist prisoners

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the (violent) extremism, terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) research field is witnessing an increasing number of studies based on primary data collection. Despite this evolution, however, conducting face-to-face interviews with former or active (violent) extremists and terrorists still appears to be the exception rather than the rule. In addition, most evidence-based research often lacks methodological transparency on the researchers’ experiences, good practices, and the challenges faced during the different research phases (e.g., making contact with the respondents, the process of creating trust, challenges linked to the prison context). Therefore, the aim of this article is to provide academic researchers with insight into the potential challenges they may encounter when contacting and interviewing former or active (violent) extremist prisoners, and how to overcome them. The results are based on field experiences of a PhD research on the process toward (violent) extremism and terrorism in which qualitative in-depth interviews are conducted with (violent) extremist prisoners in Belgium. By providing reflections and recommendations based on this fieldwork, this article can be used as a guideline to improve and increase future primary data collection and the methodological transparency and reliability within terrorism and CVE research.

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Introduction

The (violent) extremism, terrorism and CVE research field has long been characterized by a lack of primary data collection. For years, the latter was labelled unethical, extremely dangerous, unreliable and even naive. When it came to talking to terrorists, resistance and fear

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were the usual reactions. In the past decade, however, several terrorism researchers have proven otherwise (e.g., De Graaf, 2021; Khalil, 2019; Nilsson, 2017; Horgan, 2011, Dolnik, 2011; Atran, 2010; Post & Berko, 2009; Horgan, 2011; Speckhard, 2009). Although the proportion of studies drawing from interviews with (former or active) extremists and terrorists remains relatively low, we are witnessing an upsurge in the absolute number (Khalil, 2017). ‘Talking to terrorists’ is now recognized as a unique and essential method “*to understand their mental framework, to understand what leads to their recruitment, to understand how they make decisions, and to understand their inner world*” (Post & Berko, 2009, p. 146). More specifically, conducting face-to-face interviews with those that were or are involved in violent conflict may provide direct access to individuals’ experiences, and the meaning and role ascribed to these experiences (Harris et al., 2016).

Despite this evolution, most evidence-based terrorism research lacks transparency on the researchers’ methodology, good practices, and the challenges faced during the different research phases (Harris et al., 2016; Horgan, 2011; Nilsson, 2017). As indicated by the few researchers who did report on these aspects (e.g., Speckhard, 2009; Dolnik, 2011; Horgan, 2011, Nilsson, 2017), there is an urgent need for increased documentation of such experiences as unique, methodological and practical, challenges may arise during terrorism and CVE research.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to provide researchers with insight into the challenges they may encounter when contacting and interviewing former and active (violent) extremist prisoners², and how to overcome these issues. To do so, we draw on the field experiences of an ongoing PhD research on the process toward (violent) extremism and terrorism in which, so far, 21 qualitative in-depth interviews have been conducted with both former and active violent extremist prisoners of different (ideological) typologies (De Pelecijn, 2018-2023). We focus on two important research phases: the introductory phase and the interview phase. In addition, we elaborate on the (additional) challenges the prison context

² When we refer to ‘(violent) extremist prisoners’, we refer to both former and active members of (violent) extremist groups and both violent and non-violent extremists.

may bring. By providing a guideline to improve and increase future primary data collection within terrorism research, we hope to inform and motivate future terrorism and CVE researchers.

Introductory Phase: making contact

The introductory phase is one of the most important and decisive parts of the research, as the first contacts with the respondents – and thus the first impressions – are made (Horgan, 2011; Harris & Garris, 2008). Given the high distrust and small sample size of this ‘hard-to-reach’ target group, this phase implies a time-consuming, fragile and sometimes very stressful process.

Respondents can usually be contacted in different ways (e.g., online through social media, offline through local gatekeepers), although the options within the prison context are limited and subject to certain constraints (e.g., no online recruiting possibilities, mandatory screening and consent by judicial actors). Regardless of the context in which the study is conducted, however, it is important that researchers attempt to inform respondents about the study both in writing and verbally, as the latter may affect their willingness to participate (see below). In our research, respondents are contacted through two consecutive phases: (1) a brief information letter followed by (2) an introductory meeting in prison with the researcher.

Information Letters

In a first phase, (violent) extremist prisoners are best contacted and informed about the research by means of a brief information letter. In this way, respondents get an initial idea of the research design, and still have time to think about whether or not they want to participate without feeling pressured by the researcher or any other external actor (e.g., the prison management). The value of such an information letter should not be underestimated. As indicated by Horgan (2011, p. 10), *“it can be the primary deciding factor in passing on or declining a request and whether the potential interviewee can make an informed decision*

about whether or not to proceed to the next phase". Such a letter should provide respondents with sufficient information about the researcher (his/her affiliation), the research design (e.g., the research topic, the research goals and the methodology) and the further course of the study (e.g., an introductory meeting with the researcher). In this way, the respondent can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in the study.

Given the importance of information letters, and the impact they can have on the recruitment process, it is understandable that researchers often hesitate on how to phrase certain aspects (such as the research topic) and what concepts or terms to use (Horgan, 2011). However, it is important to note that researchers are not the first nor the only ones having in-depth conversations with (violent) extremist prisoners on this topic, as within prison many different actors are working in the context of (de)radicalisation (e.g., psychosocial services, deradicalisation counsellors, justice assistants, psychotherapists). In other words, (violent) extremist prisoners are not deterred by concepts like 'extremism, terrorism, political violence, deradicalisation', whether they agree with those terms or not. In our experience, there is no need to look for less loaded synonyms, or to start glossing over existing terms. On the contrary, clear communication about the research can be a first step in creating a safe and confidential interview environment. In addition, problems or misunderstandings during the introductory meetings and the interviews can be avoided in this way.

Of course, it is important to contextualize and clearly describe what the research is about, what aspects of (violent) extremism and terrorism are being examined, and who the target group is. In the information letters of the present study, for example, the objective of the research is stated as an exploration of 'how' and 'why' people start to think in a more radical or extreme way about certain themes, and 'how' and 'why' one becomes willing to make costly sacrifices for a higher purpose. The letter also indicates that we focus on different ideological typologies: religious extremism, left-wing extremism, nationalist/political violence, right-wing extremism, animal rights activism. According to our research, researchers should not only pay attention to clearly formulating the research design, but also the target population. During one of our introductory meetings, one respondent was quite

upset because he thought that the information letters were only sent to Muslims, although this was nowhere indicated in the letter. It is important to avoid such misunderstandings or clarify them during the introductory meetings (see below), as they may affect respondents' willingness to participate in the research.

The information letter is also the first opportunity to deal with the issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Researchers should immediately assure and convince potential respondents that the data will be treated anonymously and with complete confidentiality, and – especially within the prison context – will not be shared with other inmates, prison staff, or other judicial or state security actors. Our research highlights how important and decisive this issue is for respondents. Besides distrusting state security and judicial actors, there is also great suspicion towards journalists, as (violent) extremists and terrorists have often had negative experiences with them in the past (see also Nilsson, 2017; Speckhard, 2009). It is therefore important to clearly communicate in the letter who will have access to the data, for what purposes the data will be used (e.g., for scientific research, academic journals) and how the data will be processed.

Another important aspect needing further contextualization and clarification, especially when the interviews are conducted within the prison context, is 'how' the prisoners were contacted and, consequently, to what extent the researcher is collaborating with judicial authorities (e.g., prison directors, guards). The researcher can decide whether or not to mention these issues immediately in the information letter. However, as such topics may quickly lead to misunderstandings or suspicion, researchers can also choose to organise introductory meetings consecutive to the information letter in order to explain this personally to the respondents. In our research, we opted for the latter and therefore invite each respondent for an introductory meeting at the end of the information letter. Here, we mention the date of this introductory meeting, along with the fact that participation in this meeting is not mandatory and therefore there are no consequences for non-participation. From an ethical point of view, it is important to mention this in the letter, since respondents cannot – and

should not – be forced to participate in a study. On the other hand, mentioning this shows humility and respect on the part of the researcher for the respondent's decision.

We have no control over how the letters are delivered or by whom (e.g., the prison director, members of the psychosocial service, prison guards), as this is decided by the central prison management. We do note, however, that the respondent's trust (and his/her willingness to participate) can be influenced by this process. For example, one respondent was initially very suspicious towards the researcher/interviewer, thinking that she was collaborating with law enforcement or state security, as the letter was delivered to him personally by a prison actor working with him in the context of (de)radicalization. Again, it is up to the researcher to decide whether or not to include in the information letter the manner in which these are delivered to the respondent (e.g., by mentioning "*we delivered this letter to the prison staff and hope you received it well*"). If not, it is of course very important that the researcher clearly addresses these issues during the introductory meetings in order to avoid misunderstandings.

According to our research, most respondents who do not want to participate in the research, seem to make this choice on the basis of the introductory letter. Consequently, the respondents cannot not be convinced by the researcher to participate, nor it is possible to find out the reasons why respondents do not want to participate. This information can sometimes be communicated by the respondent to the prison staff. In our research, for example, three female respondents communicated to the prison guards that they are currently overwhelmed by a very large number of different prison actors working with them in the context of (de)radicalization. Therefore, they do not want to take part in yet another 'investigation'. However, as it is important for the researcher to verify the accuracy of this information, and as timing is a very important and determining factor (see Horgan, 2011), researchers should try to contact these respondents again in a later stage with the same question whether they want to participate in the research or not.

Introductory Meetings

In a second phase, researchers should organise introductory meetings in the prison(s) where the respondents are present. The purpose of these introductory meetings is twofold: (1) to provide additional information about the research and answer the questions of the respondents (if any), and (2) to meet the respondents in person and convince the hesitant or suspicious individuals to participate. In our research, these meetings take place in the rooms set up for attorney-client meetings. As usual, the respondents are called separately by the guards. Each time the guards are asked to indicate to the respondent that he/she is not obliged to come to the introductory meeting.

During the first face-to-face meeting, researchers should start by briefly introducing themselves and the research and ask the respondent whether he/she received the information letter well and if there are any questions. Again, it is very important to clearly state what the specific research topic is (e.g., the process toward (violent) extremism, experiences of Jihadis, the process of deradicalization or disengagement), which questions will be asked (or not), who the target audience is and how the research will proceed. Since this target group is highly suspicious and often resistant towards this topic, or simply does not believe in the concepts of (violent) extremism or terrorism or the fact that ‘they’ are perceived as the terrorists, it is very important to contextualize the research and emphasize the importance of conducting face-to-face interviews. This can be done by providing various arguments, for example by arguing that most research is based on secondary data analysis (e.g., file analysis) or that there is still an incomplete picture of the research topic.

As mentioned, the next decisive issue to be clarified – whether or not the researcher has already mentioned this in the information letter – is the extent to which the researcher cooperates with judicial authorities. A question that researchers certainly can expect during the introductory meetings (as this often raises concerns and distrust among respondents), is ‘how’ the researcher got access to the names of the respondents. When research is conducted within the prison context, all practical aspects of the research are mandatorily conducted in consultation with the judicial authorities, especially when it comes to research on extremism

and terrorism. The aspects for which approval must be obtained include, for example, formal permission to conduct the research, individual visit authorizations to enter the prisons, and, very importantly, contacting respondents. It is very important to explain this well and clearly to the respondent during the introductory meetings. In our study, it is indicated that the names of the respondents are obtained through the prison directors and that, in order for them to be able to give the researcher a visitation permit, they need to know who is actually participating in the research. Given that this may still cause some anxiety for some respondents to participate, it is important to reassure the respondents that all collected information will be treated with full confidentiality, that no personal names (of persons) will be mentioned or kept, and only the research team has access to the anonymized data (the transcripts). It is also crucial to mention that the research design was first screened and approved by the independent ethics committee of the researcher's university. In our research, the fact that we cooperate with the judicial authorities for the practical aspects of the research has so far not caused less or more suspicion. Rather, the respondents seem to appreciate the clear and honest communication about this by the researcher.

Introductory meetings are extremely important for collecting and convincing (hesitant) respondents. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the high level of distrust within this hard-to-reach target group, researchers should create a confidential and safe/easy-going environment by communicating and answering all questions clearly, and by adopting a calm and open attitude (see below). According to our research, this may positively affect respondents' level of trust and willingness to participate. More specifically, during the introductory meetings of our study, some respondents indicated that when they received the letter, they were not immediately inclined to participate but were so after meeting the researcher. However, although these introductory meetings seem to have a positive impact on the respondent's trust and willingness to participate, it would be naive to think that respondents immediately have full confidence in the researcher. As one respondent replied during an introductory meeting when the researcher told him that she hoped he trusts her: "*If I said I trust you, I would be lying. Maybe I trust you... Like... thirty percent*". At that moment,

the researcher responded that this was already a good start, however at the same time, it becomes clear how difficult it actually is to make a connection with these respondents, and how grateful you actually should be as a researcher when a respondent agrees to participate.

Distrust is something inherent when making contact with (violent) extremists and terrorists, both inside and outside the prison context (Nilsson, 2017; Speckhard, 2009, Horgan, 2011, Dolnik, 2011, Post & Berko, 2009). The reasons for this suspicion are usually the same: because the respondents are – some would say unfairly – followed up in the context of terrorism by law enforcement and state security actors, and/or had bad experiences with other researchers and journalists. Either this distrust is honestly stated by the respondent (as in the above quote), or you may notice this through the questions directed at the researcher. For example, a question frequently asked during the introductory meetings, was whether the researcher works together with journalists and if the results of the interviews will end up with them. Others, who doubted her role as a researcher and wanted to find out if she does not rather work for/with law enforcement or state security, said they were very surprised by the fact that it was ‘her’ who got permission for this research. For example, one of the respondents said: *“when I read your letter, I was very surprised that a Western woman is interested in me and my story. Even my own lawyer behaves distantly towards me”*. Other questions frequently asked by the respondents, relate to the specific purpose of the research, the researcher’s personal motivations and what the researcher wants to do for living after this research.

At the end of the introductory meeting, the researcher should ask the respondent whether he/she is able and willing to participate and talk about these (difficult and emotional) topics or not. In this way, some kind of verbal commitment is made with the respondent, although they still have the right to reconsider afterwards. In this context, researchers should also try to assess (indirectly) the reasons why respondents want to participate. More specifically, it is possible that respondents only participate because they think they get something in return (e.g., positive report from the prison administration, using the interview in their court case), which may lead to biased interviews. In our research, respondents often self-

report their reasons for wanting to participate; either because they are interested in the research and are curious about the results, because they think it is a nice initiative, or simply because they want to help the researcher. It is also important to find out why respondents ‘do not’ want to participate, so that the researcher can identify the underlying reasons and can decide whether the respondents can be contacted again at a later stage. During our introductory meetings, different reasons were given as to why people did not want to participate: for some female respondents this had to do with the fact that they had been transferred from the prison camps in Syria to the prisons in Belgium not that long ago, so they were still too traumatized by the things they experienced. As these cases involved children, it seemed still too sensitive for them to participate in such research. In other cases, this had to do with the respondents being too suspicious and afraid of the possible consequences of participating. In these cases, when the respondent cannot be convinced by the researcher, it is better to thank the respondent for coming to the introductory meeting anyway and respect his/her choice.

Interview Phase

The next important research phase concerns the interview phase. As with the introductory phase, the researcher should take the time to prepare properly and think about the possible challenges that may arise. In the next section, we will discuss some (1) practical aspects of the interviews, (2) the interview schedules, and the (3) interview style used in this research.

Practical aspects

A first practical aspect is the scheduling of the interviews. Before the start of each interview, it is important that the researcher has the necessary permissions from the local prison administration to conduct the interviews and enter the prison. Regarding the timing of the interview, it may be beneficial to leave some time between the introductory meetings and the first interviews, so that the respondents who were still hesitant can think about whether

they still want to participate or not. However, ‘too’ much time in between may be counterproductive as this can cause respondents to suddenly change their mind (Nilsson, 2017). Based on our experience, we would recommend leaving a maximum of two months between the introductory meetings and the first interview. If this is not possible, it is important to clearly communicate this to the respondent.

Before starting the interview, the researcher should ask the respondent whether he/she is able and willing to do an interview at that time. It is always possible that the respondent has a bad day or has to cancel other visits for the interview, which may affect the course of the interview or cause the respondent to give biased answers. It is also possible that the respondent has changed his/her mind in the meantime and does not want to participate anymore. While it may be risky to ask this question – as the question itself might cause the respondent to hesitate or change their mind – it is important to do so, out of respect for the respondent.

Next, the researcher should clearly explain the informed consent document with the respondents, as this is an important instrument to safeguard the respondents’ rights during and after the research. Some researchers (e.g., Nilsson, 2017; Speckhard, 2009) indicate that this informed consent is not easy (and sometimes even impossible) to obtain, especially when the interviews are conducted outside the prison context. Therefore, it is important the researcher takes the time to clearly explain the respondents what an informed consent document entails and why such a document must be provided by the researcher before each interview. In order to provide a handhold for the respondent, which might contribute to the trust-building process, it is recommended that the researcher provides two informed consent documents: one for the researcher (which is signed by the respondent) and one for the respondent (which is signed by the researcher). However, since some respondents might be hesitant to write down their full names, the researcher should indicate that respondents are not required to do so, but that their initials will suffice, or that they can also insert some check mark. Finally, in order to guarantee complete anonymity and ensure that these documents are not misused by third

parties, the informed consent documents should be kept in a secure place³ only by the researcher (i.e., not by the entire research team), which should also be explained to the respondents when going through these documents. If respondents refuse to sign, and the researcher does not record respondents' names in his/her research, the researcher can ask for an oral informed consent instead (see e.g., Speckhard, 2009). It is important that – prior to the research – these procedures (e.g., the informed consent documents) are first submitted to the ethics committee/institutional review board (IRB) of the researcher's institution for approval⁴.

The informed consent document must give an overview of the rights of the respondent: e.g., the possibility to ask for more information about the research/researcher at any time, the right to read the transcripts or notes, the right to stop the interview or to skip certain questions. Next, the document must provide information on who has access to the anonymized data and where (and for how long) the anonymized data will be stored. Finally, if the researcher wants to record the interviews for the purpose of transcribing, the informed consent document must ask the respondent's permission. Of course, as we noted during our research, this latter is a very delicate matter where even the question alone can harm the process of trust-building (Nilsson, 2017; Speckhard, 2009). To ensure that respondents are somewhat more comfortable with the fact that the interview is being recorded, the researcher should indicate that only the researcher has access to the recordings, that the recordings are deleted after transcribing, that all names and personal data in the transcriptions are anonymized and that the recorder can always be paused if the respondent wishes to tell something that they would rather not have recorded.

If respondents do not give permission to record the interview, the researcher should accept their decision and take notes instead. This, of course, complicates conducting the interviews and processing the data. More specifically, taking notes makes the interview more unnatural, makes it difficult to listen to the person with full attention, may force the

³ For example, in a locked filing cabinet located securely at the researcher's university or on the researcher's secured, password protected personal drive of the university.

⁴ If necessary, researchers may also seek additional advice from the specialized data stewards at his/her university.

respondent to interrupt his/her thoughts as he/she is waiting for the interviewer, and can make the respondent suspicious given that he/she does not know what is being written down. As for the raw data, the interviewer loses a lot of verbal but certainly also nonverbal information (e.g., silences, hesitations, corrections). It takes a lot of training to be able to take good notes, and to find your own style (e.g., only write down keywords or rather full sentences? Paying attention to non-verbal information as well?). In this context, it can be helpful to type out and complete the notes immediately after the interview, as the (verbal and non-verbal) information is then still fresh in the memory of the researcher.

Interview Schedules

The next aspect researchers should prepare thoughtfully, with care and some caution, are the interview schedules, as specific difficulties may arise within this type of research (Horgan, 2011; Nilsson, 2017; Khalil, 2017).

First of all, as in any other research, it is important to avoid suggestive or biased questions. More specifically, frameworks, theories or hypotheses from which the research starts must remain in the researcher's mind, without (unconsciously) pushing the respondent in a certain direction during the interview. For example, according to most terrorism studies, certain grievances play an important role in the process toward (violent) extremism and terrorism. However, there may be individual cases where such grievances are not identified. In order to avoid asking questions from a too narrow perspective or the install confirmation bias, researchers can decide to have the first interview start from the respondent's own (life)story. On the one hand, this allows the respondents to talk/narrate in their own voice without too many interruptions by the interviewer. In this way, a workable and more easy-going environment is created. On the other hand, by starting from the respondent's point of view, a lot of information already comes to light and certain 'more sensitive' topics become easier to discuss. In our research, for example, past traumatizing events or experiences were often self-cited by the respondents, making it easier for the researcher to pick up on this afterwards.

Second, respondents may not always address certain aspects (deeply enough) during the interviews, or their answers may not go beyond ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘I don't know’. In these situations, it is not always easy for the researcher to not put words in the respondent’s mouth. Questions probing why certain choices were made at those specific moments, are also not always easy to figure out. This is partly because respondents are asked about things (e.g., events, choices, feelings) that happened in the past. In other words, respondents retrospectively rationalize their motives and experiences. On the other hand, a lot of these things happen unconsciously. There are irrational moments and coincidence factors in the decisions that are made. As a result, there are multiple blind spots for which no explanation can immediately be found. In general, talking about past actions will always be a mix of accurate recollection, memory bias (and loss or distortion), selective recall, responsibility attribution, and self-presentation. Assessing which is more likely the case during the interview is a crucial but difficult responsibility of the researcher. At the right moment, the researcher needs to probe or remain silent, formulate a doubt or a question, evaluate when to let something rest or retake it, and identify whether the respondent’s answer is clear enough. In order to increase the reliability of the results and help respondents to recall certain memories, researchers should triangulate between different methods of empirical enquiry: for example, by combining the interview-data with interviews with family members or peers, by using visual instruments/methods or vignettes during the interviews, or by also conducting analyses of open-source data (see e.g., Gaudette et al., 2020; Altier et al., 2012).

A third problem researchers may encounter when interviewing (violent) extremist prisoners – especially when interviewing religious extremist respondents – is that many questions are answered purely ideologically or theologically, which diverges from what the researcher really wants to know psychologically. In this context, Nilsson (2017), indicates that it is important to keep the respondents on track with the interview questions, but also to give them the space and opportunity “*to fulfill their religious duty of giving advice*” (p. 14) (see below). Nevertheless, it can be very informative to receive this ideological (background) information. On the one hand because the researcher does not (always) have access to all

(historical, theological, political) knowledge, and on the other hand because it helps the researcher to contextualize certain motivations, experiences and behaviors.

In line with this, our research shows that some respondents already know many of the ‘typical’ theoretical terms or concepts, and thus know how to use them in their narration to external actors (e.g., court members, prison actors, journalists, researchers). In one of our interviews, for example, one respondent said: *“Normally they should take into account identity crisis, the young age, the fact that brains at that time are not yet fully grown. Normally these are extenuating circumstances that can be used in court (he smiles). They often say, “he just had an identity crisis and came from a poorer family” (...). When the researcher asked him at that point if he had experienced such an identity crisis, he said “No, of course not. No, I never had that... No...”*. As mentioned earlier, it is wrong to think that respondents do not know what is written in the literature. While it was honestly refuted by the respondent in this particular interview, socially desirable answers can be somewhat avoided by asking the same questions during an interview, but in a different way. When respondents use certain ‘well-known’ theoretical concepts, the researcher can also ask what they mean by these in their specific situation. Additionally, in order to increase the validity and reliability of the data, researchers can also choose (if possible) to interview the respondents more than once (Dolnik, 2011).

Finally, researchers should take into account the sensitivity of certain research topics or interview questions while preparing the interview schedules. More specifically, it is important for the researcher to ‘unpack’ interview questions on (potentially) heavier topics, such as the use and/or approval of violence, so that they come across as less harsh or abrupt (Khalil, 2017). For example, *‘when do you think violence is justified?’* is probably less confrontational and therefore more likely to be answered than *‘why do you approve of violence?’*. How and when certain questions are asked implies an assessment of the situation and the respondent him/herself (see below). In this context, it is also crucial that the research questions do not put the respondent in a difficult position. Respondents that are still active within the (violent) extremist or terrorist group, are bound to secrecy about certain aspects

(Zulaika, 1995; Horgan, 2011). Thus, as mentioned, it should be immediately clear to the respondents what the research is about. Hence, the researcher should not deviate from this during the interviews, despite the interest in other topics.

Still, even if researchers take the above aspects into account, there will always be interviews that do not go well or do not provide sufficient useful data, no matter how well you prepared (Horgan, 2011; Nilsson, 2017; Speckhard, 2009). This may be because the respondent is still too emotional, makes a plea for his/her innocence instead of conducting an interview, does not answer the question concretely enough (whether or not consciously), or does not say everything because the respondent is still too suspicious of the researcher. Additionally, not all questions will be answered during the first interviews, which can sometimes be very frustrating for the researcher. In order to collect as much useful data as possible, it is important not only to pay attention to ‘what’ questions to ask, but also ‘how’ to ask them.

Interview Style

A frequently asked question, both within research and in practice, is ‘who exactly’ is suitable to talk to (violent) extremists and terrorists. Should such research rather be carried out by a male or female researcher? Someone young or older? If the research focuses exclusively on religious extremism, should the researcher be Muslim, someone specialized in Islam, a historian, or rather a sociologist or psychologist? And if you have the necessary methodological and theoretical knowledge, will they even be willing to talk to you at all? These questions can lead to uncertainties even before the start of the research and may even prevent researchers from taking the step to face-to-face interviews. However, the right question to ask is not really ‘whether’ we should talk to terrorists and ‘who’ should do this, but rather ‘how’ we should talk to them (Staniland, 2008; Post & Berko, 2009).

In addition to theoretical knowledge, and thus knowing ‘which’ questions to ask, it is also very important to know ‘how’ certain questions should be asked (Nilsson, 2017; Horgan, 2011). The ideal research scenario taught within qualitative research is that of the objective,

emotionally detached researcher who, with minimal contact, asks the questions to the respondent who in turn answers them (Nilan, 2002; Horgan, 2011; Nilsson, 2017). However, it is not always possible, nor desirable to assume such a position, especially with this type of research. On the one hand, it is indeed important to listen to the respondents in an objective and non-judgmental way during the interviews. This should, however, not be taken for granted. The researcher's objectivity and emotions can be severely tested during these types of interviews, especially when discussing topics that are sensitive or more difficult to hear. In our research, there were even respondents who apologized for what they said during the interviews, because they assumed that their stories, experiences or opinions must be very difficult for the researcher to listen to. Showing the slightest sign of displeasure, judgment, or disgust in those situations can have a very negative impact on the interview and the respondent's willingness to participate even further. Before engaging in this type of research, it is therefore important for the researcher to realize that emotionally charged topics will be discussed. It takes practice (e.g., reading other people's experiences, watching documentaries), interview experience, and a certain 'natural' neutrality to be able to engage in these conversations. The researcher should be honest before starting such research about whether he/she will be able to handle it or not. However, if the interviews and/or the interview situations have an impact on the researcher, it is important that this can be discussed within the research team on a regular basis. In this way, the researcher can share his/her emotions, and the research team can look for ways to minimize the impact on the researcher in order to safeguard the researcher's wellbeing. In this regard, Winter (2019) recommends that researchers should seek advice from a qualified professional if necessary, or that they should apply mindfulness techniques or breathing exercises in order to cope with the impact of the materials.

It also happens that, during the interview, the respondent suddenly asks a tricky or difficult question to the researcher, such as '*are you religious?*', '*what do you think about the migration policy yourself?*'. Or when they talk about the outgroup during the interview and consider you part of it. Taking into account the sensitivity of these topics, it is important to

carefully consider how you are going to respond to these questions without losing your professional distance and credibility as a researcher, or without suddenly entering into a discussion with your respondent (Nilsson, 2017). In this context, it is also very important that the interview itself does not become a radicalization ‘push factor’, or that it hinders people’s deradicalization or disengagement process. In our research, if certain questions are posed by respondents, they are either answered honestly by the researcher when it is felt that it will have little or no effect, or they are considered rhetorical questions that do not necessarily need to be answered.

On the other hand, it is important that professional objectivity is not understood as going to prison in a detached and emotionless manner, only to conduct the interviews and then return home. Rather, it is necessary to connect with the respondent and create a confidential, workable and easy-going interview environment. This implies that the interview is some kind of ‘giving and taking’ (Nilsson, 2017). Of course, this is something that may take quite some time. Such an environment can be created by, for example, talking to the respondents about different topics (e.g., the research or about completely other subjects) both before and after the interviews. In line with Nilsson (2017, p.10) we are convinced that “*while such questions violate the textbook ideal of minimal contact in interviews, they should not be seen only as a disturbance but as part of trust-building that continues throughout the interview*”. Our research shows that it gives both the researcher and the respondent a safer and more easy-going feeling. It is important to maintain this genuinely interested and empathetic attitude (both verbally and non-verbally) toward the respondent and his/her story during interviews. This does not mean that you will lose your professional objectivity as a researcher or that – as social workers are often accused of – you suddenly become ‘the terrorist’s next best friend’ (Horgan, 2011). It does mean that you can simply find a good balance between being professional and critical on the one hand and being ‘human’ on the other.

Lastly, Horgan (2011, p. 5) indicates that “*the interviewer’s behavior should be planned and highly organized*”. From the researcher’s perspective and experience, this implies, however, that as a researcher you have to be prepared for the fact that you cannot be

prepared for everything. Emotions, discussions, sometimes even threats, are things that cannot be predicted in advance. A large part will therefore depend on some sort of ‘gut feeling’ on the part of the researcher about which question can be asked to which respondent at what time and in what way. However, this is a skill best acquired through experience (Nilsson, 201; Horgan, 2011, Dolnik, 2011).

Prison Context

As already indicated, the prison context poses additional challenges while researching (violent) extremism and terrorism. These challenges relate to (1) the interview setting, (2) the respondents (sample) and (3) external political and social influences.

Prison setting

In our research, the interviews are conducted in prison visiting rooms that are set up for attorney-client interviews, which are usually small and uncomfortable, with only a table, two chairs and an emergency button. We notice that this context sometimes complicates the trust-building process and the creation of a workable and safe/easy-going interview environment. For respondents, the interview begins in a situation that – to them – resembles a police or state security interrogation. For the researcher, on the other hand, this specific setting can cause additional stress, as you are in a small, unguarded space with someone you do not know and with whom you must broach difficult questions, leading to responses that you cannot predict nor control. In this regard, we also note that the COVID-19 situation also makes it somewhat difficult to conduct such sensitive interviews. Due to safety measures, it is mandatory to place a glass or plastic screen on the table and to wear a mask during the interviews. This can create some kind of extra (physical) ‘distance’ between researcher and respondent as it becomes much more difficult to apply non-verbal communication strategies and show emotions. Ironically, this makes respondents even less aware of ‘who is hiding behind the mask’.

Some of these factors (e.g., the surrounding, safety- and security measures) are unavoidable and often vary from prison to prison and from country to country. During our introductory meetings and interviews, for example, the researcher is always alone in the visiting room with the respondent/prisoner. That is, there are no guards in or outside the visiting room and the respondents are not handcuffed either. In this way, external factors that could influence the research (e.g., fear of being overheard, influence on voluntariness) are already eliminated. On the other hand, of course, it is important that the safety of the researcher is not compromised in any way. If there are no guards present in the visiting room, and the researcher conducts the interviews alone, it is important for the researcher to assess whether the conversation is going in a safe and proper direction, which requires some sort of gut feeling on the part of the researcher and, of course, interview experience. If the conversation seems to go in the wrong direction and the researcher no longer feels safe, it is better for the researcher to end the conversation in a friendly manner. Given that the prison director is often well aware of the behavior of individual inmates (e.g., through their detention behavior), we recommend that researchers discuss these security concerns with the prison director prior to the study.

Second, we note that, despite the fact that anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed by the researcher on the basis of an informed consent document, you do not control how others treat the information they have. More specifically, within prison it goes around quickly if someone from outside (such as a researcher) regularly visits the prison, especially if this happens in the context of a study on violent extremism and terrorism. Not only among the (prison) staff, but also among the prisoners (and even across different prisons). For example, during the introductory meetings, some respondents indicated that they knew the researcher was going to visit them, even though there had been no previous visits in that prison. While this can be positive in the sense that some prisoners may promote the research and the researcher to other prisoners, it can also have a negative impact when something goes wrong. This may have a major impact on the recruiting and overall research process.

Impact on Sample

In addition to challenges related to the interview setting, the prison context can also pose some challenges with regard to the respondents. While some researchers (e.g., Nilsson, 2017) argue that gaining access to respondents is easier within the prison context (as opposed to gaining access to active fighters), the prison context can also pose certain unique barriers. For example, prisoners can be transferred to another prison, repatriated to their country of birth after the judge has revoked their Belgian nationality, or are released (with or without conditions). This means that you can lose respondents during the research process due to factors totally unrelated to the respondent. If respondents are released due to their end of sentence, they will no longer be subject to judicial authorities and will only be reachable if the researcher has requested the respondent's contact details in advance. In this case, the respondent must first give the permission to contact him/her after imprisonment. Due to privacy concerns, it is also not possible to request private contact details through the prison management. If the prisoners are released under some modality (e.g., electronic supervision), they will still be subject to the judicial system and may be contacted through the services outside the prison. Also in this case, researchers will need to have the necessary permissions.

As such changes are not (always) communicated to the researcher by the prison management, it is important that the researcher asks the respondent before or after a first meeting how long he/she remains in prison. If the respondent will be released in the short term, researchers can choose to provide their contact details or request them from the respondent. However, our research shows that, although respondents initially indicate that they want to participate in the study (while in prison), they may no longer be inclined to participate once they are released.

It is also possible that the prison management is of the opinion that the respondent is not yet able to conduct an interview due to the respondent's current state of mind, because he/she may pose a danger to third parties, or because the research itself might have a counterproductive impact on the prisoner. As previously indicated, it is important that the research does not become a radicalization 'push factor' or that it hampers the prisoner's

deradicalization or disengagement process. In our study, the prison management did not allow us to contact two respondents for these reasons. It is important for the researcher to understand that it is still the local prison management that decides (and assesses) whether or not respondents can be contacted and interviewed by the researcher, and that the well-being of the respondent is of primary importance.

Social and Political Influences

Finally, the prison context is also subject to external social and political influences, which may disrupt the entire research planning. For example, given that there are regular strikes in prison, scheduled interviews can sometimes no longer take place and must be postponed. In this context, the COVID-19 situation has also caused a lot of delay. More specifically, we had to postpone the empirical part for six months because visitors were no longer allowed to enter the Belgian prisons. It is important that researchers take such factors into account and try to include this in their planning.

Figure 1: Guideline/tool for conducting interviews with (violent) extremist prisoners

		Aspects	Goal(s)	Risk(s)	Approach
		CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH (VIOLENT) EXTREMIST PRISONERS	(b) Interview Phase	(1) Information letters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To make the first contact with the respondents To convince the respondents to participate in the research
(2) Introductory meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide additional information about the research and answer the questions of the respondents (if any) To meet the respondents in person and convince the hesitant or suspicious individuals to participate To build a workable and safe environment 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resistance and distrust of the research subject Distrust caused by the way the researcher came into contact with the respondents. Fear of cooperation with journalists, judicial or state security actors Respondents that participate only because they expect something in return 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly state the research topic, the research questions, target audience and the research process. Emphasize the research's importance (e.g., by giving arguments). Clarify the extent to which the researcher cooperates with judicial authorities, and how the respondents were contacted. Already ask the respondents if they are willing to participate Identify the reasons for (not) participating
(3) Practical aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ensure the interviews can proceed smoothly To give respondents the time to decide whether or not to participate To ensure the research (and the interviews) is in accordance with the ethical guidelines To avoid misunderstandings during and after the interviews 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practical aspects that are not in order and delay the course of the research Respondents who reconsider their decision to participate The timing of the interview that has an impact on the course of the interview No informed consent for recording the interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrange all practical aspects before the start of the interviews. Leave time between the introductory meeting and the interviews. Ask the respondents if they are willing to conduct an interview that day. Prepare (and discuss) a clear informed consent document that outlines the respondent's rights, provides information about who has access to the anonymized data and where (and for how long) the anonymized data will be stored, and that requests permission to record the interviews. If the respondent does not give consent to record the interviews, take notes.
(4) Interview schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ask well-reasoned, non-suggestive, and appropriate (theoretical) questions to gain the best possible understanding of the research topic 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking questions from a too narrow perspective Putting words in the respondent's mouth Memory bias (and loss) Questions being answered purely ideologically or theologically Questions that could deter and/or endanger the respondent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid suggestive or biased questions. Start the first interview from the respondent's own (life)story. Keep the respondents on track with the interview questions, but also to give them the space and opportunity to tell 'their' story (in their own manner). 'Unpack' interview questions on (potentially) heavier topics Verify that the research questions do not deter or endanger the respondent
(5) Interview Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To adopt a professionally objective and critical, yet empathetic and open attitude and interview style that ensures that sufficiently clear 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The researcher's objectivity and emotions can be severely tested The respondent may suddenly ask a tricky or difficult question to the researcher Unpredictable situations: e.g., 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Know 'how' certain questions should be asked Listen to the respondent in an objective and non-judgmental way Realize that heavy topics will be discussed Connect with the respondent and create a confidential, workable and easy-going 	

			answers are given by the respondent	heavy emotions, threats, discussion	interview environment. ▪ Be prepared for the fact that you cannot be prepared for everything
Pri so n Co n te xt	Prison Setting			▪ Complicates the trust-building process and the creation of a workable and safe interview environment	▪ Focus on creating a workable and safe/easy-going interview environment
	Sample			▪ Problems with anonymity and confidentiality	▪ (Re)assure the respondent that, on the part of the researcher, anonymity and confidentiality is taken into account
	Social and Political influences			▪ Loss of respondents/drop-out	▪ Ask the respondent how long he/she remains in prison, and – if they are released in the short term – provide your contact details
				▪ Disruption of the research planning	▪ Take external factors into account and try to include this in your planning.

Conclusion

Based on the above results, we conclude that conducting interviews with (violent) extremist prisoners is a very time-consuming, fragile, and sometimes even highly stressful process. It is therefore important that terrorism researchers are very well prepared and have an understanding of the various difficulties that may arise during the different research phases. Although this article had focused on terrorism and CVE research, we are convinced that these results may also be useful to practitioners and social workers working in the context of disengagement and deradicalization. With this in mind, we have provided an overview of the most important aspects and decisions that should be taken into account when meeting and talking to (former or active) (violent) extremist individuals, the difficulties or challenges this may entail, and how they can be overcome (see figure 1). By providing this guideline, we hope to inform and help others to do what was once thought to be impossible.

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