Applying Qualitative Social Research Designs and Methodologies to Improve the Rigour of Strategic Intelligence Analytical Practice

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Applying Qualitative Social Research Designs and Methodologies to Improve the Rigour of Strategic Intelligence Analytical Practice

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Can applying social science research techniques—in more deliberate ways—improve strategic analysis, including the extent to which policy-makers are influenced by it? Scholars have not systematically nor extensively gone through the social scientific research literature to assess how they might be relevant to improving strategic analysis. Additionally, despite a growing focus on analytical standards since 9/11, busy heads of intelligence agencies (working within increasingly fiscally tight environments), still struggle between giving customers a constant diet of current intelligence and keeping one eye on emerging threats. And despite best intentions to comprehensively evaluate analytical standards, dealing with the day to day ‘bush fires’ is likely to come first before agencies spending much time focusing on whether specific social science techniques can improve the credibility and value of strategic intelligence products. The parallels, however, between qualitative research design, collection and analytical processes used in strategic intelligence suggest that more explicit uses of qualitative methodologies, methods and tools in strategic analysis may improve assessments. Exploring these issues, however, need not require a great impost on those responsible for producing or evaluating strategic intelligence assessment. A small step forward may be to merely do an ‘audit’ of products and how they were influenced (if at all) by qualitative research.

The questions addressed in this paper are threefold: what can a qualitative research design process bring to enhance current collection and analytical procedures? Second, which qualitative methodologies could most usefully help build strategic analytical credibility and value? Third, and leaving aside the limitations of what is knowable in assessing emerging threats, how can we use qualitative methodologies to bolster the validity and reliability of strategic assessments?

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1 An earlier version of this paper was given at the panel Intelligence Analysis, the Social Sciences and History: Understanding and Explaining International Actors and Outcomes (2 April 2013, International Studies Association, San Francisco).
His recent book, *Intelligence and Intelligence Analysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011) examines a range of intelligence reform issues post 9/11 across Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the US and UK.

**Historical perspectives on Intelligence and the social sciences**

In this paper, I argue that intelligence analysis and by extension strategic/estimative analysis can be viewed as an inter-disciplinary social science. Like tactical and operational analysis, strategic analysis has drawn from a range of social sciences (political science, economics, criminology, sociology and psychology), including their methodologies and techniques to assess complex, emerging or ‘over the horizon’ issues (Walsh, 2011, pp. 236-245). For example, political science has provided theoretical frameworks on political culture and bureaucratic politics, which have informed how analysts understand political actors behave and make decisions (Pye & Verba, 1965; Allison, 1971). Sociology and social psychology have been influential in developing intelligence methodologies such as social network analysis (Sparrow, 1991; Koschade, 2006).

Before focusing on the role of social sciences in strategic analysis in particular, it is necessary first to contextualize this discussion against the broader historical backdrop of how scholars have viewed the relationship between social sciences and intelligence processes more generally.

A contextual understanding of the linkage between social research designs, methodologies and analysis is important for two reasons. First, it underscores fundamental and ongoing debates over whether intelligence practice involves explicitly or implicitly the use of one or more social scientific methodologies and it what ways. Second it addresses more basic epistemological debates over whether intelligence is a ‘science,’ ‘art’ both or neither. Both questions are not only interesting theoretically they have practical consequences for what decision-makers should expect from intelligence. Where one falls on both these questions will influence your view on the broader role of social sciences in improving strategic analysis, and in particular, the relevance of qualitative research designs to improving estimative products.

The post World War Two intelligence studies literature shows a long history of intelligence practitioners drawing on the social sciences in the analytical process. Several studies provide good summaries of scholarly debates about whether intelligence should be seen as a kind of social science itself, an art or even a combination of art and science (see, Marrin, 2011, pp. 21-37; Collier, 2005, pp. 17-35; Prunckun, 2010, Clausser, 2008). It is beyond the scope of this paper to drill down into the various debates here. However, in order to better understand the link between strategic analysis and the social sciences it is necessary to survey the work of a few early intelligence scholars, who were influential in exploring the use of social science methods in a range of intelligence contexts including strategic analysis.

Marrin documents several early and influential scholars who saw the utility of social science to intelligence analysis and/or viewed intelligence as being a social science. These included
amongst others: George Pettee (1946), Washington Platt (1957), Sherman Kent (1949), Klaus Knorr (1964) and Richards Heuer (1978 onwards) (2011, pp. 25–27). Kent in his seminal work, Strategic Intelligence said ‘that the social sciences very largely constitute the subject matter of strategic intelligence’ (1949, p. 156). In his volume, Strategic Intelligence Production, Platt described how intelligence analysis could be improved by relying on the social sciences:

First, by providing an understanding of the general principles of the project, the extent of our knowledge of it, and the problems involved. Second, by providing specific suggestions as to methods which can be applied with necessary modifications; Third by pointing out common pitfalls to avoid. Fourth, by providing references as a start for further study. In nearly all problems confronting the intelligence officer some help, even if not a complete answer, is available from those who have already wrestled with similar problems (Platt, 1957, p. 133).

Many of the earliest generation intelligence scholars (from the 1950s to 1970s) also had a very confident and optimistic view of the value of the ‘scientific method’ to intelligence analysis (Platt, 1957, pp. 75-85). For example, Platt suggested that the most appropriate analytic method is that ‘closest approximation to the ‘scientific method’ permitted by the nature of the data that the social scientist deals with’ (Platt, 1957, p.137). Platt’s focus on the ‘scientific method’ reflects a dominant view from the 1950s to 1970s by (behaviouralist) social scientists that the social world contained knowable and observable facts. These facts could be derived from empirical or hypothetico-deductive experiments traditionally seen in the physical sciences. Random takes a similar view to Platt on the importance of ‘building up within the intelligence community a knowledge of scientific method and study their application to intelligence problems’ (1958, p. 79).

In 1964, Knorr’s evaluation of how analysts use social science also underscores the idea that intelligence analysts can use social science methods to validate data and produce inferences about how the world works through hypotheses and the relationship between fact and hypotheses (Knorr, 1964, p. 11; Marrin, 2011, p. 26). For example, empirical or explanatory political science methods became particularly influential in the CIA with analysts trying to explain the behavior of decisions of individuals or organizations (Collier, 2005, p.24). This focus on empirically explaining political decision-making behavior of foreign leaders increased during the 1970s with Richards Heuer assembling a number of works by CIA analysts about the lessons that could be learnt from applying social science methods to political intelligence analysis (Heuer, 1978, pp. 1-10). A lot of the methods discussed appeared to be quantitative (such as, theoretical modeling, regression, bayesian analysis), and underscored the belief that the intelligence community could use empirical social science approaches to ‘test’ estimates, and ‘seek relevant new facts’ that would assist the CIA’s political intelligence analysis (Heuer, 1978, p.2). The adoption of empirical social sciences methods and the use of its language: ‘testing’, ‘hypothesis testing’, ‘finding facts’, ‘following the scientific method’ continued into the 1980s (Ben Israel, 1989).
The work of insiders like Heuer was also encouraged by changes the CIA leadership was making aimed at improving analytical tradecraft. By 1990, then Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates presided over several training initiatives—established to get analysts to challenge their arguments and judgments, defend analytical positions and more effectively determine between what was fact and what was their opinion (Marrin, 2011, p.29). Subsequent CIA leadership built on Gate’s initiatives using the ‘scientific method’ to ensure analysis (particularly estimative intelligence) came from a sound evidentiary base, and that the analysis was both logical and transparent. For example, by 1990 even greater emphasis was being placed on various structured analytical techniques (analysis of competing hypothesis, devil’s advocacy and high-impact/low probability analysis) to employ the rigor used in social science methodologies to the analytical process. The use of structured analytical techniques have now become commonly taught tools across the wider US intelligence community, but little is known about the extent to which these techniques improve the accuracy of intelligence analysis. Merely using a tool labeled ‘analysis of competing hypothesis’ does not make it equivalent to a social science methodological approach used in psychology or criminology. These ‘methods’ need to be tested and validated before a claim can be made that they are ‘scientific’ in the sense that this word is understood in the social sciences (Marrin, 2011, p.33).

More recently, like their earlier colleagues, scholars have argued the case for the analytical process as either being a kind of science (Collier, 2005), or a discipline resembling the social scientific approach. For example, Bodnar draws a similarity in steps taken between the formulation of a research problem to the identification of an intelligence question. Both he argues, involve the application of a ‘data driven’ and ‘hypothesis driven’ approach to ‘forage through new data then synthesize that data into evidence based schemas and theories’ (Bodnar, 2005, p.1). However, while Bodnar’s presents a model to help the analyst make sense out of the increasing bulk of data, he is really providing a description of a process for the analyst to follow rather than any detailed exploration of the validity and relevance of specific social science methodologies for intelligence analysis.

In contrast, other studies do attempt to address how social research designs and methodologies might be applied to intelligence analysis (Collier, 2005; Smith, 2008). Timothy Smith makes the novel case for community wide advanced intelligence assessment labs that would ‘operate according to a formal, documented assessment methodology—specifically scientific methodology’ (Smith, 2008, p. 268). Smith suggest that a kind of ‘scientific prediction’ could be possible if collaborative assessment labs would consist of analysts using structured analytical techniques to generate scenarios and hypotheses that would then be ‘formalised’ in computational models and simulation testing by technical support staff using various tools such as bayesian statistics and evolutionary algorithms (Smith, 2008, p. 274). However, somewhat worryingly, his discussion downplays significantly the value of qualitative approaches as incapable of prediction. His formal, documented assessment methodology also does not articulate which complex emerging threat issues would be amenable to his empirical rationalist approach to estimative intelligence. It
remains largely unknown the extent to which any complex emerging threat issue with little reliable data can be confidently interpreted more ‘empirically’ by its reduction to an algorithm.

In contrast to Smith’s attempt to sketch an empirical methodological approach to estimative intelligence, Collier provides detail about the merits of both quantitative, qualitative and mix-methods research designs and how the selection of these depends on the questions the analyst is seeking to answer. While the author discusses various social science methods (for example, content analysis, interviews and focus groups), there is little detailed discussion on what emerging threat issues these might be usefully be applied or how they would increase the validity and reliability of results (Collier, 2005). Collier’s focus also seems to be on international relations/political science skill sets advanced analysts require rather than what other social science methodologies that might be applicable in the post 9/11 security environment, which is still largely dominated by non-state actor threats.

**Strategic intelligence and the social sciences**

Despite a long history of drawing on the social sciences, the scholarly focus has not for the most part been on a close examination of what social science methodologies and techniques, and from which disciplines have specifically been used in strategic intelligence analysis. The literature provides us with few clues about how can qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) methodologies be applied in strategic analysis. Further, the literature is non-existent on which ones might be more useful in producing better strategic analysis. Or put another way, can some social science methodologies improve the ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ of estimative assessments?

As shown in this paper, qualitative research is about trying to gain a deeper understanding of the social world rather than trying to explain this world in terms of a reductionist equation. While intelligence analysts already have analytical processes and tools (for example structured analytical techniques), which are aimed at bringing a deeper understanding of complex, emerging threats, can a more explicit borrowing of qualitative research methodologies improve the outcomes of these processes?

Strategic analysis remains an evolving ‘tradecraft’ in many of our intelligence agencies (Walsh, 2011). From my own professional experience as a former intelligence practitioner, I was aware that we could do better at getting more granularity around some of our strategic judgments—beyond sometimes what seemed to be heavily caveated—almost neutered key judgments, where the decision-maker was left with the impression that everything or anything was possible. Given strategic analysis is not about predicting ‘the future,’ how can we improve/inform our understanding of what factors are driving various trajectories that in turn could lead to alternative futures? As our intelligence agencies continue to face budgetary pressures, policy makers will be looking for strategic assessments that can help them arrange their limited resources in ways that hopefully can prevent or disrupt emerging threats in cost-effective ways. Can certain qualitative methodologies, methods and tools enhance our understanding of the factors driving strategic
change, and how might these in Fingar’s words, help policy makers ‘devise strategies and policies to maintain positive trajectories and shift negative ones in a more positive direction’ (Fingar, 2011, p. 53).

The answer to all the questions posed above are worthwhile exploring in themselves, but more importantly, I argue in this paper that a more deliberate and systematic ‘stock take’ (evaluation) of qualitative methodologies may improve strategic analysis in three significant ways. First, exploring the various data collection and analytical techniques from social qualitative research methodologies may assist in the application of more systematic and effective approaches to improving strategic intelligence collection and analytical processes. In other words, strategic analysts can either use qualitative methodologies themselves more effectively in the collection and analysis of relevant information; or become more discerning consumers of research using qualitative methodologies. Second some qualitative methodologies, methods and tools may lead to a deeper understanding of evolving strategic threats and opportunities—a point which will be elaborated on below. Third, it is hoped that the more deliberate application of qualitative methodologies to strategic analysis may assist in making analytical biases more explicit in some subject areas. Just as the seminal quantitative approaches of social and cognitive psychologists, Tversky and Kahn (1974) showed how our minds are susceptible to systematic errors, which lead to systematic biases in judgments and decision-making, there may be other qualitative methodologies that could also assist in reducing strategic analytical bias.

**Qualitative methodologies, methods and tools defined**

There can be confusion and disagreement amongst scholars when using terms such as ‘methodologies, methods and tools, so before continuing the discussion of their application, I will briefly define each of these terms. I use ‘methodology’ in this paper to mean the overarching framework, design or blueprint for a piece of research. The methodology selected in a qualitative research question relies on the kind of question(s) being investigated. Examples of qualitative methodologies include: ethnography, phenomenology, and action research (O’Leary, 2010, p. 89).

A ‘qualitative methodology’ is associated with a broad number of characteristics in contrast to ‘quantitative methodologies. The ascribing of such characteristics is based on social science tradition and differing views and debates about how we can know about the social world. I will not enter these epistemological debates in the paper. The key difference, however, between quantitative and qualitative methodologies is built around the key assumption of whether we can explain (also referred to as: positivist and empirical) or understand (also referred to as interpretivism and constructivism) the social world (O’Leary, 2010; pp. 2-14; Robson, pp. 15-44). The quantitative methodological tradition is more aligned with explaining the social world, that is, that social phenomena can be explained, tested and that singular truths can be revealed. Quantitative methodologies generally start with a hypothesis that seeks to draw on large data sets
to draw some generalisable observations. The data is usually in the form of numbers and the
analysis is completed using statistics.

In contrast adherents to qualitative approaches reject that there is one single truth—they argue that
there may be multiple truths that can be revealed through a deeper understanding of the social
world. Data sets tend to be smaller in scale. Data is usually in the form of words and the analysis
is completed thematically. Such differences between quantitative and qualitative while helping
us to understand how social science research has developed does sometimes place an unhelpful
narrow view of how to answer research questions and what methods can be used with both
methodologies. In reality, a combination of both broad methodologies and the exploitation of
data types (numbers and words) may be useful in addressing a research problem or question. So
it is not correct to equate certain collection and analysis of data to one only of these approaches.

A method is the technique used to collect and analyse the data once the researcher has decided on
the appropriate methodology. O’Leary suggests that methods of data collection include:
interviewing, surveying and observations, whereas methods of analysis include: statistics
(quantitative studies) and qualitative strategies (thematic analysis) (O’Leary, 2010, p. 89).
Finally tools, according to O’Leary, are ‘the devices used in the collection of research data, e.g.
questionnaires, observation checklists and interview schedules’ (2010, p. 89).

**Qualitative methodologies and strategic collection and analysis**

The first point key point of this paper is that qualitative methodologies, methods and tools
provide another way for analysts working on strategic products to think about what issues are
important (from an intelligence collection and analytical perspective) in addressing a request
given to them by a policy maker. Strategic assessments are normally completed over longer time
frames compared to tactical or operational intelligence reports. While it is standard business to
adopt a systematic approach to the collection and analysis of all information that may be relevant
to the strategic assessment, it may also be useful for analysts to think like a researcher who is
about to embark on the development of a new research project. The methodological design
process for both qualitative and quantitative methodologies can assist in sharpening up the scope
of the strategic project and ensuring collection and analytical efforts are focused on the right
questions. Applying a disciplined approach to designing the strategic assessment project, much
like a researcher would to developing a research project, may also improve the overall credibility
and value of the strategic analysis in the end compared to an organic/less planned approach to the
collection and analytical phases of the strategic analytical product.

Before discussing, in the next section how specific methodologies, methods and tools may help
us better assess strategic threats and opportunities, it is useful to reflect on how qualitative
methodologies may improve in a general sense our approaches to strategic collection and
analysis. Much to the disappointment of some decision-makers, it is not possible in strategic
analysis to generate a comprehensive list of all possible outcomes for an issue that is still
emerging in the security environment. As Fingar (2011, p.53) correctly points out the strategic environment is ‘dynamic and interactive, the time lines are long and there is a number of variables, multiple players to understand’.

Despite this complexity, however, adopting qualitative methodological approach to existing collection and analytical strategies may provide additional ways to ensure gaps in collection and analysis are identified. Analysts could use qualitative methodological research designs to engage in better outreach to outside experts, more effective tasking of their own libraries and more focused use of closed information sources such as comint, humint and imagery.

Qualitative research methodologies may also provide a deeper understanding of the ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ about different issues and actors in the strategic environment. These questions (who, where, when, how and why), can help define collection efforts and ensure that the tasking and scope of a strategic analytical product has the sufficient depth and breadth required by the policy maker. Turning to ‘who first’. In a strategic assessment of factors impacting on radicalization of youth groups to 2020, do we want to restrict our focus to Islamic jihadis, or do we also want to include ultranationalists and eco-terrorists? If the policy-maker wants the focus on Islamic jihadis only how is this defined? There is an almost endless number of groups that could be examined under the banner ‘Islamic jihadis’ For example, in the strategic analysis, does the analyst include Islamic youth in post-Arab spring countries, perspectives of Islamic diasporas in Western European cities, or those already in custody due to terrorist offences?

How analysts collect all relevant information and intelligence on the subject area is part of the well trodden steps of the intelligence cycle. But getting the analyst to think about the problem more like a researcher embarking on a qualitative research project, may help them understand whether they have gathered a sufficient sample of information across all topic areas to produce assessments that are more inductively valid. Staying with the ‘who’ question discussed in the earlier paragraph, on a practical level this comes down to addressing the number of humint and open sourced reporting and from what areas are relevant and sufficient to addressing the topic? From a methodological perspective the ‘who’ or scope question is also about the sampling size required to address the topic area. If the scope is an assessment of factors driving Islamic youth radicalization out to 2020, as noted earlier, the next question is what groups need to be included or excluded, and then what closed (classified) or open sources are required to address the issue?

The next methodological question the analysts need to ask is where is the domain of the study? A good qualitative methodological approach will situate the research to a location or locations. Funding and security impediments may preclude an analyst actually going to a location to observe or interview first hand groups–particularly radicalized Islamic youth. Though as discussed later, an analyst drawing on an open source research project that does collect primary data from radicalized youth groups does need to establish the domain of any study used in their intelligence analysis. It is a good discipline for the analyst to situate their work as they might if
they were developing a research plan to study radicalised Islamic youth themselves. For example, using a qualitative methodological design can help the analyst focus on the *rationale* of exploring certain locations (for example, whether to focus on radicalization amongst Islamic youth in post-Arab Spring countries, impoverished West Africa or Islamic youth populations in Western Europe). Situating the study in the right location(s) is important for not only getting the right scope (which includes doing something a decision-maker wanted), but from a collection and analytical perspective is most appropriate in order to address such a question, is within the capabilities of the analyst and is doable in the timeframe.

Another key aspect of designing any research methodology is addressing the ‘when’ question. Timing is always a critical factor for the collection and analysis of research data as it is for the analyst collecting the same for assessing strategic issues. Analysts will often say they never have enough time to collect or analyse all relevant intelligence for a strategic assessment. Sometimes timings will be client and at other analyst’s driven. But all intelligence analysis—whether it is a current or strategic intelligence—can only be seen as a snapshot of events, contributing factors and drivers at the time the intelligence product is disseminated. The ‘complete truth’ is never captured in space and time with intelligence analysis. So what is doable in the overall timeframe will impact on the validity of assessments made. Just like the researcher embarking on a qualitative research methodology, the greater the timeframe the more territory that can be explored. A greater timeframe may allow a deeper collection and analytical period—possibly allowing the gathering of insights from subject matter experts external to the analysts’ agency or from the research community.

The remaining questions, *how and what* relate to the specific methods selected for collecting and analyzing the data required to address a strategic issue. A full discussion of some of the different methods available in qualitative research occurs in the next section. For many working in the intelligence community, however, it would not be usual for them, for example, to collect themselves primary data from methods such as: interviewing, surveying and observations of Islamic jihadist communities. Though, being more mindful of qualitative research methods may steer their collection and analytical efforts to examine trends in Islamic communities which are more relevant to their key questions. As shown in the next section, the methods selected will all impact on the credibility and integrity of data used to answer questions being explored. Finally what *tools* has the researcher used in their study, and are these are appropriate for the questions we are seeking to explore? For example, are the interview questions, observations or documents analysed in a way that is relevant to helping identify and validate strategic drivers behind the issue?
Deeper understanding of evolving strategic threats/opportunities

There are a number of qualitative methodologies that could potentially be useful in helping intelligence practitioners gain a deeper understanding of evolving strategic threats and where there are opportunities to intervene for policy-makers. In this paper, I will restrict discussion to an overview of ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. Other methodologies may also be relevant such as action research to improving intelligence analysis practice longer term, but the focus of this paper is to examine what qualitative research methodologies may improve an understanding of evolving strategic threats now.

As noted above, in designing a research project, the (research) question comes first and then a methodology is selected that bests answer the question. Whether one or more, or even any of the qualitative approaches discussed here, will be useful in addressing key questions explored in a strategic assessment will depend on the nature of these questions. It is entirely possible of course, that in some strategic questions, qualitative methodologies will not assist much at all in understanding the evolving nature of the question(s).

**Ethnography**

Ethnography explores the way of life from the point of view of its participants not from the researcher’s world view (Atkinson, et al, 2007; Wolcott, 2008). The approach for an ethnographer is to immerse themselves within a culture for a significant period of time to explore how members in the culture are constrained by social tradition, common patterns of belief and behaviors. Ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology, particularly in the work of Clifford Geertz, who argued that there were underlying frameworks that produce both behavior and meaning in culture. There are many potential strategic issues, which would potentially benefit from an ethnographic approach to the intelligence analysis. For example, drawing on the example discussed earlier of what factors are likely to influence the radicalization of young Islamic populations by 2020, longer term ethnographic studies completed by Islamic scholars working close to youth in ‘at risk’ countries may help better uncover strategic drivers which influence radicalization in ways that just relying on classical humint sources or studies by western scholars may provide a more restricted ‘world view’ of radicalized youth.

Similar ethnographic studies could also be completed on marginalized or first generation Islamic immigrant populations in major urban areas of the US and other western countries to get a deeper understanding of what factors are influencing cultural group identities; including those involved in self-identifying as a jihadists. Again this type of ethnography may provide different yet useful perspective on the strategic drivers for radicalization of youth than what a similar study may show in the Middle East. Example of such studies have started to emerge in the literature focusing on Islamic communities in some western countries, (see for example, Jenkins 2010; Springer, 2009). However, what I am suggesting here is that studies completed by Islamic youth or youth workers themselves rather than those of western scholars in collaboration with local...
Islamic communities may help further validate or challenge ‘common understandings’ about radicalization and the factors which will influence this over time.

Other topics such as gang formation and the links between terrorism and organized crime may also be potentially ripe for exploring with ethnographic studies, where the objective is to understand the processes involved in group identity formation and whether these factors change over time. Ethnographic studies of gangs and organized crime groups of course may carry unacceptable risks to the researcher, but methods for example, which rely on detailed interviews of gang or organized crime figures in custody could provide useful insights into how individuals self identify with gangs and whether these influences change over time.

If some strategic topics may lend themselves to be understood better using an ethnographic approach, what data collection and analysis methods could potentially be employed? In classical ethnographies of traditional societies completed by cultural anthropologists observation is the most common method. The objective is to immerse one’s self in the culture being studied and attempt to build some empathy with the group. I have described one scenario above where an Islamic youth scholar or an Islamic youth group leader from a Middle East country with a large youth population could directly participate in a radicalized group over time to understand factors influencing radicalization in these communities. The benefits and practicalities of this method of data collection may present, of course, problems if the researcher overly influences the group he or she is studying by their presence. Inevitably too, as with all ethnographic research, how the researcher deals with the inevitable cognitive filters through which they observe group dynamics needs to be considered. In other words, to what extent is the researcher seeing the actual cultural dynamics of the group or really just the researcher’s own world view being reflected back onto observations? To what extent too, does the researcher become captivated by the group’s world view and is unable to be objective about the key drivers influencing radicalization of Islamic youth?

Some scholars and intelligence agencies since 9/11 have started to see the value and connection of looking again at the socio-cultural elements of threats with other intelligence sources, but it remains unclear the extent to which ethnographic research is being used systematically in strategic analytical products of our intelligence agencies (Patton, 2010).

The other two main data collection methods for ethnographies are interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews in some cultural settings which promote informal transactions of information represent a non threatening way to gain insights on issues such as the influences on radicalized Islamic youth and what factors may be influencing change in these. Again non-Western ethnographic perspectives from interviews may also provide an additional layer of perspectives not available in the current scholarly literature or by feeds from humint or other close information systems. These results can be compared with intelligence analytical debriefs of terrorist youth offenders in prisons and the academic literature. Document analysis is also a useful method for collecting and analyzing data from ethnographic studies, particularly by
examining common themes expressed by Islamic youth in their blogs, tweets, face book sites and other social media. Document analysis via social media has proven to be an increasingly useful source of open sourced intelligence and may be useful for showing pathways to radicalisation (Ormand et al., 2012, p. 805). In short, an ethnographic approach to studying a topic such as youth radicalization is likely to require the use of all three methods discussed here in order to better triangulate each data source used.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena as they are experienced by an individual. This methodological approach is about the perception or subjective feeling that an individual has to a particular phenomena not what causes the phenomena itself (Moustakas, 2000). Phenomenology has been mostly used in applied fields such as health sciences. It uses vocabulary grounded heavily in philosophy and so unless the researcher has some experience with philosophy it is not an approach for the novice researcher. Given that perception can drive intention and therefore action, however, phenomenology can potentially be another useful approach for the strategic analyst to keep in the tool kit to better understand the subjective experience of some individuals. An examination of historical records that survey how political leaders felt about their decision-making—not necessarily the rationales for these decisions—may provide strategic analysis with a greater understanding of perceptions behind certain foreign policy decisions of leaders. For example, examining historical records could be useful to see how leaders perceived a threat context—not why they did what they did, or whether observers thought they should have done something differently. This will help contest the mirror imaging or rationale actor approaches that sometime still plagues analysis. Phenomenology may also in some circumstances be useful in exploring contemporary issues and assessing what factors impact on these in the future. For example, phenomenology could be used by researchers to examine the perceptions lone actors such as suicide bombers, or a rogue scientists involved in nuclear proliferation may have about their actions. Reflecting back to our earlier example of factors that will influence the radicalization of Islamic youth—Gartenstein-Ross’s personal account of converting to Islam, becoming radicalized—then leaving a salafist group linked to Al Qaeda—while not adopting a phenomenological approach shows the kinds of studies that strategic analysts could more usefully draw upon (Gartenstein-Ross, 2008) to garner insights into threat actor’s subjective feelings about choices they make. The usual method for phenomenological studies are interviews, but also ‘data’ can be drawn from secondary sources such as journals, books, letters and the internet.

Grounded theory

The third type of qualitative research methodology that may assist in improving our understanding of evolving strategic threats is grounded theory. There are many different definitions of grounded theory (see for example, Lamp and Martin, 2007; Charmaz, 2006 p. 2). In short, however, the first step in a grounded theory approach is to start with a research question
or topic then devise a method(s) to collect the data. The next step is to code that data and analyse for themes. Themes in turn generate theories about what might be going on. In a grounded theory study, the data collected and analysed may reshape the original question or indeed take the study altogether in a different direction. Hence a grounded theory approach allows for a flexible, iterative and emergent framework to the methodological plan from the start. Arguably, out of all qualitative methodologies it may be the closest to the intelligence analysis process. Just like analysis, researchers using grounded theory work inductively to generate theories from the data they collect.

Researchers analyse deeply the data sets collected looking for ways that generalizations can be made in which to build trends and ultimately theories. Analysts too working in strategic analysis start with specific and finite data sets and from these produce analytical generalisations about the significance of these drivers. Drawing again on our example above of the factors that will influence radicalization of Islamic youth in 2020, grounded theory may help the strategic analyst be clearer about their theorising on one or more drivers for change in this area. Structured analytical techniques (Heuer & Pherson, 2011; Bebe & Pherson, 2012) provide some support to analysts in helping them test tentative hypotheses and identify drivers for complex issues, however, these tools, particularly applied when little intelligence and research has been collected, or as an early brainstorming exercise, may close off too early the strategic analytical process to other possibly more significant drivers. Additionally, while structured analytical techniques may provide a good place to start with analytical theorizing about complex emerging issues, the iterative process of intelligence collection and analysis needs to continue so that initial sampling of data can be ‘tested’ against subsequent data to elucidate where your analysis may need to go next conceptually and theoretically.

The continual process of data collection, analysis and writing leads to what is referred to in grounded theory–theoretical sampling of your data. Theoretical sampling can help the researcher ‘delineate further the properties of categories’ and their range of variation’ (Charmaz, 2006, p. 102). For example, let us say that ‘technology’ is assessed as an important strategic driver (category) influencing youth radicalization. Then what does the analyst include in their analysis of this driver–technology? Do they include the role of media, cyber-hacking and propaganda? All these properties could potentially be included and their inclusion or exclusion will lead to a different understanding of the strategic significance of a driver such as technology.

Grounded theory may help the analyst develop, ‘better more robust categories that clarify relationship between categories’. Additionally, Charmaz argues that in grounded theory engaging in theoretical sampling involves both deductive and inductive reasoning. The methodological approach is inductive as you develop a theory and then you try your hunches against further data collection. You then test what become firmer hypotheses ‘empirically’ by examining them further against more data (Charmaz, 2007, p. 103). This inductive and deductive analytical process hopefully, will result in more confident strategic assessments.
Qualitative methodologies and strategic analytical bias

In any strategic intelligence analytical work that seeks to estimate the significance of several still emerging drivers there is always the possibility of being completely wrong or not ‘right enough’ regardless of what methodologies were employed in the assessment. In strategic analysis the endgame is not the production of facts but judgments based on estimations—much like in the world of social science there are few facts or laws of nature and far more theories. In both strategic analysis and social science research there is plenty of scope for poorly executed methodologies, and collection and analytical bias. The contestability of the analytical process—applying structured analytical techniques to challenge assumptions or key lynchpin judgments, and peer review will assist in reducing partially some analytical errors and biases. Using qualitative research methodologies in addition to the above usual analytical processes, (during both the collection and analysis stages), may also be useful in improving the ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ of strategic analytical products for policy-makers by helping to manage bias, improving consistency to how data is managed and the extent to which assessments are relevant and appropriate.

Qualitative research studies also promote peer review in which a colleague can play ‘devil’s advocate’ in regards to all aspects of the methodology used by other analysts. Using, however, research terminology such as ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ in the context of strategic analysis may contradict what I discussed earlier about the large possibility of being wrong with strategic analysis given many of the ‘variables’ are still emerging. How can one check for validity or reliability in the absence of being able to ‘measure’ all the variables? Before addressing the appropriateness in using terms such as ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ in the strategic analysis context it is important first to define how I will use them.

Defining reliability and validity.

Leaving aside the issue of whether these terms are applicable in the strategic analysis context, they also remain difficult to define in qualitative studies. In social science methodology, reliability normally refers to ‘the degree with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions’ (Hammersley, 1992, p. 67 cited in Silverman, 2010, p. 274). Validity means ‘truth or the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers’ (Hammersley, 1992, p. 57 cited in Silverman, 2010, p. 274).

There are however, varying perspectives amongst scholars about what these terms mean and whether these are even appropriate to a qualitative context (see for example, Silverman, 2010, p. 274; O’Leary, 2010, Holliday, 2002, p. 8). O’Leary (ibid., p. 114) suggests that debates over the
credibility of qualitative studies can arise when such studies are assessed inappropriately using positive/quantitative criteria—including terminology such as ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’.

Other scholars argue that these terms have been applied too rigidly by researchers, who use quantitative fixed designs with narrow conceptions of reliability and validity that are not appropriate to the ‘conditions and circumstances required in flexible, qualitative enquiries’ (Robson, 2002, p. 170). Punch’s (2006) definitions are an example of the rigid interpretation seen in quantitative studies when using these two terms. Punch (ibid., p. 155) refers to reliability as the consistency of measurement or the ability to gather similar results if the same data set was retested by another researcher. He defines validity as the extent to which what is studied can be ‘measured’, and the truth and accuracy of any findings or conclusions that can be drawn from the data (ibid.). I argue that Punch’s definition of reliability may be workable in the context of the qualitative research methods used in strategic analysis; however, his definition of validity is less appropriate for use in strategic analysis context. In a qualitative research context, ‘truth’ and ‘accuracy’ are difficult things to be sure of (Robson, 2002, p. 170) and in strategic analysis ‘truth’ and ‘accuracy’ can sometimes seem even rarer commodities. For example, in all intelligence analysis, we must be mindful of the unique challenges in using information where there is frequently intentional deception by individuals or groups of interest (Johnston, 2003, p.61). But does this mean that the term ‘validity’ is useless methodologically both in the qualitative research and in the strategic analysis context? I think the answer here is no and much depends on how the term validity is defined and applied.

For example, I disagree with O’Leary’s perspective above, which implies that certain criteria such as ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ can only strictly apply to positivist/quantitative methodologies rather than also to the post-positivist/qualitative context. I argue that there are other additional characteristics that assist in evaluating the validity of qualitative studies. For example, Holliday (2002, p. 8) lists three criteria (choice of social setting, choice of research activities and choice of themes and focuses) that can be deployed as sources of validity in qualitative research. Holliday breaks his first criterion (choice of social setting) down further into both ‘the feasibility and how substantial the study was’ (ibid.).

Holliday’s three criteria may also be useful in assessing the overall validity of key findings in strategic analysis. For example, did the collection and analytical phase chose the appropriate
social setting (Middle East, Islamic diasporas in the West) in which to understand radicalization of Islamic youth to truly and fully give the policy maker a deeper understanding of these issues? Using Holliday’s (2002, p. 8) first two criteria for valid qualitative research (choice of social setting and choice of research activities), analysts need to ask themselves where the data is coming from on some of the issues about radicalization of youth in Islamic communities. This is part of the quality control anyway in good intelligence–checking the veracity of closed information sources, but it also should include a growing number of open sources which can dominate the collection take that strategic analysis is constructed from. For example, what kind of studies were used? As noted earlier, there is a growing volume of literature on factors triggering radicalization (Springer, 2009; Jenkins, 2010), but what qualitative approaches if any are used in this literature, how were interviews, case studies and documents collected and analysed, and what issues can be identified based on methods selected that could impact on the validity of results? It is doubtful that policy makers will want to see a full explication of the validity of any qualitative methods used to produce key judgments, but they will be interested in seeing whether such assessments are supported logically and reliably by the ‘evidence’ provided. A better understanding of how to assess the validity of qualitative research used to support strategic analysis can be an important part of showing superiors what Fingar calls their ‘homework’ before a finished product is disseminated to policy makers (Fingar, 2011, p. 110).

In our earlier discussion of qualitative methodologies (ethnographies, phenomenology, grounded theory), we discussed how they may potentially be used in strategic analysis. In all of these methodologies, the objective is not to come up with, in contrast with quantitative studies, a substantial or pre-determined sample size for data in order to make analysis. But the selection of a sufficient number and diversity of data sets from interviews, document analysis, case studies is still important to be able to achieve some analytical generalizations (as opposed to statistical generalizations) from the data collected (Yin, 1994, p. 31). Additionally, in our example of factors influencing radicalization of Islamic youth in the future, the strategic analytical product may be more valid if a number of data sets from different studies are triangulated to validate generalizations and cross check key analytical judgments.
Reliability

As discussed earlier, Punch defines reliability as the ability to gather similar results if the same data set was retested by another researcher (Punch, 2006, p. 155). In many qualitative research projects, of course, it is not possible for another researcher to ‘measure’ the exact or even similar social contexts as those previously studied. Social contexts are dynamic and in the security environment threat actors and their significance come and go. For example, a researcher may interview a group of radicalising youth in a landmark study, but this same data set may not be exist in the future if group members leave, change their identities, or are not willing to talk to subsequent researchers.

Some qualitative methodologies, discussed earlier, such as ethnographies may in principle produce rich data sources on factors influencing radicalization. Though, in reality access to research participants and their willingness to be forthcoming—along with the influence of time and funding constraints—will impact on the extent to which analysts using such research are able to generalise reliably from the analysis presented. All qualitative studies, but particularly ethnographic studies, require the researcher to build a good rapport with those being studied. Additionally in ethnographic studies, there is always the risk that the researcher’s own attempts to ‘be one of the locals’ can result in biases which influence the reliability of results.

Bias can present itself too when using other qualitative methods such as structured or semi-structured interviews. Interview bias—both in how participants are selected and the sorts of biases participants communicate during interviews is also another key concern impacting on the reliability of qualitative studies. Strategies can be adopted to minimise interview bias—including using multiple interviews from different segments of a social context, and triangulating data with secondary data sources can help as well. Though bias will always be part of any qualitative research design, the trick—much like the use of structured analytical techniques is to make them as explicit as possible.

Despite difficulties, which exist in defining terminology such as ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ and how they are operationalised in a qualitative research methodology, O’Leary (ibid., pp. 114-115) suggests that all research projects, regardless of whether they are positivist or post-positivist informed methodologies, should share common characteristics of credibility and integrity. These characteristics include things like managing subjectivities and assessing whether the
methodology has been approached with consistency. The question is not so much whether positivist/quantitative or post-positivist/qualitative research methods are more credible than the other; the issue is how one defines characteristics of credibility when using different qualitative methods.

O’Leary suggest that there are a number of strategies for achieving credibility in qualitative studies, which are also useful in improving credibility in strategic analysis (ibid., pp. 114-115). These include:

‘saturation (only finishing collecting data when extra data no longer adds richness to understanding or helps build theories), crystalisation (building a rich and diverse understanding of a single situation and accepting that what we see depends on where we look), prolonged engagement (investment of time sufficient to learn the culture, understand context, and or build trust and rapport), broad representation (representation wide enough to ensure that an institution, cultural group, or phenomenon can be spoken about confidently), peer review (external check on the research process in which a colleague is asked to act as a ‘devil’s advocate’ in regards to all aspects of the methodology).’

O’Leary (ibid., pp. 114-115) also suggest that other techniques may help obtain confirmation or verification of qualitative studies and strategic analysis and include: ‘triangulation (using more than one data source to confirm the authenticity of each source), member checking (checking that interpretation of events, situations gels with the interpretations of ‘insiders.’) Full explication of method (providing readers with sufficient methodological detail so that studies are auditable and or reproducible’.

Conclusion

This paper explored the role that a more deliberate application of qualitative methodologies may play in improving strategic analysis. It argued that while qualitative methodologies and research design are not the panacea to all the challenges confronting the collection and analysis of strategic intelligence, such methodologies may be helpful in three respects. First, the systematic approach underpinning qualitative methodologies may improve analytical capabilities, including producing better assessment of strategic indicators. A fuller understanding of strategic indicators could result in better questions, which in turn produces more focused intelligence collection and analytical efforts. Second, a greater knowledge of and use in qualitative methodologies such as ethnography and grounded theory could be particularly useful for strategic analysts trying to understand longer-term social drivers of change in the security environment which cannot be ‘explained’ solely by classical sources of intelligence such as comint or imagery. Qualitative
research drawing on open sources (primary and secondary data) may also provide a deeper understanding of where critical gaps are too in humint. Third, qualitative research methodologies, particularly grounded theory, has a number of parallels already with the standard collection and analysis phases seen in the intelligence cycle. However, adopting some of the strategies used in qualitative research to assessing for ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ can provide another trip-wire in addition to those already used in the intelligence production process to improve decision-support from strategic assessments.

References


