Researching "Intellectual Radicals" in the West

Cases.

Abstract

The present case study is an account of the research method used in my previous article "Intellectual Radicals Challenging the State: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the West." In the case study, I document the research process and, in particular, the process of choosing a research method by navigating the opportunities, obstacles, and challenges faced by the researcher studying a sensitive population, in this case members of an Islamist group. This case study explores all the relevant steps in developing a research project, starting with preliminary research and research design, exploring the method in action and the practicalities and lessons learnt during the research process. This case study concludes by identifying the following five core elements for developing and carrying out a good research project: choosing a pertinent research topic, choosing a suitable research method, planning the fieldwork, data analysis, and the researcher's flexibility. These five core elements constituted the basis of my research on Hizb ut-Tahrir and why the group is committed to a continuous vocal challenge against Western states. They also helped me overcome a number of challenges (both in the field and during the research planning) by providing an effective equilibrium between

flexibility and rigor.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Choose the most adequate research context for their project
- Choose the relevant population
- Identify the essential elements necessary to design an effective research method
- Apply the main methods for qualitative data collection
- Develop a functional attitude during interviews
- Envisage the main challenges and obstacles they might encounter
- Develop alternative plans to overcome possible obstacles

Project Overview and Context

The present case study focuses on the vocal radical Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) and its challenge to Western states in the political and social fields. The term "vocal radical" is used to refer to all those Islamist groups presenting a strong anti-Western and anti-integration stance but that condemn the

use of violence (Wali, 2016, p. 102). The article *Intellectual Radicals Challenging the State: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the West* was the outcome of research, conducted entirely for my PhD project, which focused on HT and the group's current appeal to young Muslims in the West. Given that the greatest portion of academic literature on Islamism has focused on terror groups, I wanted my research to focus on the broadly unexplored universe of vocal radical groups, which represent the main preference of those Muslims in the West who might agree with the ideological tenets of violent groups but who do not agree with their tactics. Such individuals are more inclined to participate in the activities of vocal groups like HT rather than engage in violent jihad.

Because of their stance against violence, vocal radicals legally operate in the majority of Western states, where they disseminate their propaganda against the West as a corrupt system. In this way, they serve as pressure groups, influencing political agendas and affecting wider society. I wanted my research to contribute to enhancing the understanding of vocal radicals, and I chose the group HT for three main reasons. First, the group is one of the most long-lived of such organizations still active today, and it is currently operating in more than 45

countries around the world. Since its foundation in Jerusalem in 1953, HT has experienced rapid expansion, evolving into a well-structured organization, which has successfully resisted bans and persecutions (Taji-Farouki, 1996). Furthermore, HT has not changed over the years: It was founded by a group of Palestinian Islamic scholars as a protest-for-justice group, engaging in an intellectual fight for the rights of Muslims to free them from their oppressors globally, and this continues to be its main goal more than six decades after its constitution (Hizb ut-Tahrir Australia, 2016).

The second reason HT is an appropriate choice as a case study involves the nature of HT's ideas, which center on the re-establishment of the caliphate (*khilafah* or Islamic state). The advocacy for the re-establishment of the caliphate is accompanied by the group's strong anti-Western rhetoric, which frames the Western system as an enemy to defeat. The combination of these two elements served as a prompt for me to further investigate this kind of organization, defined as an "Islam ideological vanguard" (Hanif, 2012, p. 202). Undoubtedly, HT stands out as one of the oldest Islamic revivalist groups advocating for the caliphate, and its ideological tenets have certainly influenced a multitude of later pan-Arabic protest

groups with strong anti-Western stances.

The third reason is related to the second one and concerns the power of HT's ideas. Even if HT leadership has always rejected violence and has presented the group as an intellectual hub, HT's ideas might have sometimes served as a "conveyor belt to terrorism" (Baran, 2005, p. 11), fostering the creation of violent groups or personalities. This is the case of the proscribed organization Al-Muhajiroun, a group established by a former HT member in Britain (Omar Bakri), which openly supports violent methods. Also, the July 7/7 London bombers were identified as alleged members of a British HT splinter group (Baran, 2005).

Research Design

For this project, I used a mixture of theoretical studies and empirical data gathering within a qualitative research design. More specifically, I chose constructivism as the most suitable theoretical framework for the project because it takes into account the agents' background, knowledge, and interpretative schemes as core elements shaping their worldview and preferences. As a result, constructivism was useful for explaining individuals' choices and orientations as well as HT's worldview.

I designed my research method according to the object under analysis, namely Hizb ut-Tahrir. Its characteristics led me to choose specific methods of data collection. For instance, the group's longevity and extensive group-sponsored literature and publications led me to use content analysis, while HT's strong presence on social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) led me to use social media analysis. At the same time, the high levels of education among HT (current and former) members, their participation in public speeches and events, as well as their eagerness to take every opportunity to promote the caliphate as the ideal system led me to use interviews, observation, and focus groups.

Given that HT is present in 45 countries around the world, I had to select specific contexts to analyze. I chose to explore HT's activities in the United Kingdom—the headquarters of the group in Europe—and Australia. In particular, I decided to conduct my research in London and Sydney, the two cities where HT is most active in their respective countries. This choice was the result of months of preliminary research on HT activities in the West. When I arrived in the fieldwork locations, I first tried to contact potential participants through official channels (by emails to the media offices in the United Kingdom and Australia) and then

broaden the circle through snowballing methods.

Nevertheless, the original plan did not work very well. Nobody answered my emails, so I decided to take part in as many HT-sponsored events as I could in both countries, including talks, lectures, and conferences. This strategy was successful because I was able to meet many people in person and explain who I was and what my research was about, which allowed me to broaden my circle of contacts more easily. In particular, female members played an important role in my research: I had greater accessibility to female members, while I could not directly approach HT male leaders and obtain individual interviews with them. Trust-building was essential in this phase, and it took months and constant attendance at HT-sponsored events in both London and Sydney to foster these relationships. I had to be flexible, reschedule my plans according to the participants' preferences, and change my research methods when necessary. For instance, in London none of the members I contacted agreed to an individual interview. Therefore, I had to change the original plan and gather as much data as possible through observation during public events where HT leaders were present.

Research Practicalities

Although the group describes itself as having "one mind" globally, I encountered many differences between the British and Australian branches of HT. Whereas in London it was very difficult for me to access the current members of the group and carry out individual interviews, in Sydney, I found a much more open attitude. In both cities, I first contacted current members and local leaders through HT-sponsored events. In London, HT and its events maintain a low profile, and I had the impression that the group operates in a semi-clandestine manner due to multiple threats of being banned by the government. Therefore, I had to find alternative ways to gather my data. I decided to attend other events—mostly organized by other Muslim organizations (such as Cage)—where HT spokespersons were invited to speak.

On those occasions, I had the chance to listen to their narratives and chat with them after their speeches; however, in spite of their friendly attitude, none of them agreed to an individual interview. Presumably, the recent occurrence of the Paris attacks (13 November 2015) fostered a stronger suspicion of outsiders and thus made them fear being further stereotyped as

"dangerous radicals" not only by the media but also academia. I also decided to interview prominent members of London's broader Muslim community who were not affiliated with HT Britain to get the perspectives of the mainstream Muslim community on HT.

My interviewees in London included Salman Farsi (Media & Communications Officer at the East London Mosque, which is one of the most important mosques in the United Kingdom and is located in the borough of Tower Hamlets where HT is very active) and Aysha Al-Fekaiki, one of the leaders of the Muslim Student Union at the London School of Economics, an alleged HT recruitment pool for young intellectuals (Counter Extremism Project, 2017; Wahid, 2015; Yilmaz, 2010). Both interviewees gave their consent to reveal their identities by signing an appropriate consent form prior to the interview. This consent form was part of the documents assessed by the Ethics Commission of the University of Melbourne, which approved my research project and related field activities.

In Sydney, the situation was completely different. The group was very open; its events were publicly advertised, and anyone was welcome. The group also has a convention center (the

KCA Centre in Lakemba) where members often gather for the center's many regular events. It was much easier for me to attend HT-sponsored events and to speak with current members, and thus in Sydney, I could follow the original research plan.

Method in Action

The research method I chose turned out to be well-suited to my research. The data used for this article are part of the total data I collected for my PhD thesis for which I analyzed 14 books of HT's official adopted literature, 400 HT online textual posts (from the official websites of HT Australia, HT Britain, HT Central Media Office, and from Facebook), and 83 visual posts from YouTube, Facebook, and HT official websites gathered between October 2015 and May 2017. I also attended 13 events, conducted three focus groups, and interviewed 16 current members of HT Australia.

The 16 interviews with current HT members allowed for an in-depth analysis of their experiences within the organization, providing insights into the factors that attracted them to the group and made them want to stay. Furthermore, the small sample size highlighted the specificity unique to an individual's

experiences. Thus, an individual is not seen as a mere element of a sample with certain characteristics but becomes a case per se (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

As mentioned before in the text, it was easier to get in contact with HT members in Sydney rather than in London where no one allowed for an individual interview. Therefore, 16 is in this respect a significant number and a remarkable achievement given my non-Muslim background. Previous studies on HT with more than 16 interviewees were mostly conducted by male researchers, most of whom were former members or supporters of HT (Hamid, 2016; Wali, 2013).

In addition to the reluctance of the Hizbis (members of HT) toward a Western person outside their group, other challenges I faced during my fieldwork concerned the interviewees demographics, my restricted access to some of the group's activities, the absence of official and reliable data concerning the number of HT members in the United Kingdom and Australia, and the shortage of information regarding the establishment of the first cells in both countries.

With regard to demographics, male perspectives were fairly limited in the final analysis, given that only four men were

interviewed. The almost exclusive female-focus of the project was a result of the gender segregation between males and females within the group. I had greater accessibility to female members, while I could not directly approach HT male leaders and obtain individual interviews with them. Instead, I had to go through their wives; once approved by the wives of male leaders, I could then interview their husbands. Trust-building was essential in this phase, and it took months and constant attendance at HT-sponsored events both in London and Sydney.

Nonetheless, while having restricted access to HT's male leadership, my gender was a significant advantage for examining the women of HT; as a woman, I could participate in women-only gatherings sponsored both by HT and its sister organizations (such as *Ansar Sisters for Revival*). Thus, I had a privileged position for observing the activities of women in the group and the ways they operate, a topic about which very little is known. This allowed me to analyze the roles of women in the group, as I had direct access to observe their activities as *da'i* (a person who calls others to Islam), teachers, and public speakers. This privileged access as a woman gave me a new insight into female Islamic activism in non-violent groups

such as HT. Another challenge I faced was the prohibition on participation in HT's *halaqaat* (study groups). These study groups are attended exclusively by HT members or *daris* (students, members-to-be) who are all devout Muslims.

Being a Muslim is a prerequisite for attending these regular meetings. Despite numerous requests, HT members did not allow me to attend. Nevertheless, this refusal led to a unique encounter with one of HT's *da'i*, which was again due to my position as a female Western researcher. In fact, before attending *halaqaat*, I was told "you need Islam first" by some of the women of HT Australia. Therefore, I was invited to talk with one of HT's female *da'i*, who tried to persuade me to convert to Islam. This experience provided me with a unique insight into HT's recruiting methods for individuals who do not come from Muslim households or have a Muslim background.

I was able to observe how HT leaders try to persuade *kuffar* to embrace Islam, a topic that is still relatively unexplored, but which merits further research given the presence of Western converts in HT branches throughout the world. Finally, I had to face two more challenges deriving from the lack of official data on both the numbers of HT members in the British and

Australian branches and from the shortage of historical records on the establishment of those branches. I overcame these two obstacles mostly by interviewing the official spokespersons, monitoring the official numbers of participants to the recent *Khilafah* Conferences in the two countries and exploring different sources of HT-related literature to historically frame the establishment of the first cells in Britain and Australia.

Practical Lessons Learned

I learnt several important lessons both during data collection and analysis. During data collection, the interviews and focus groups were especially useful in this regard. I managed to set up three focus groups with the women of HT Australia after their sponsored events in Sydney. It was common for them to mingle after their gatherings and on three occasions (between February and May 2016) I gathered important data on their perceptions and ideas on relevant topics for my research. Participants were between seven and 10, the atmosphere was informal, and they were encouraged to talk as much as they needed to express their points of view. I led the conversation, introducing the theme to be discussed and re-focusing the debate when needed. The main themes discussed during the

three focus groups were the caliphate, Muslims living in the West, the role of women in Islam, the West as an enemy of Islam, and the religious duties of Muslims.

During the focus groups, I took extensive notes—participants did not consent to recordings—and gathered important firsthand data on HT's vision of the West as a religious, economic, and political enemy of Islam. From the focus groups and interviews, I also learnt that it is essential to be very considerate and flexible when dealing with groups of people, especially with religious minorities advocating for such a sensitive topic as the caliphate. I first introduced myself as a young researcher eager to learn more about HT. I was very careful to avoid any biased terms (such as radical, Islamist, or anti-Western).

Participants were encouraged to tell their stories of how they came to join the group and what led them to embrace such a big change in their lives. These interviews were not mere reports of experiences, but were conducted as a dialogue, where the respondent was encouraged to focus more on a specific theme relevant to this study. I also learnt many lessons on how and when to ask for an interview. During the first week of my fieldwork, I adopted a very direct approach to potential

participants: I contacted them via email, introduced myself and my research project, and immediately asked for an interview. This method was not fruitful because of the Hizbis' widespread initial suspicion toward me.

I learnt to be patient, to meet the people I wanted to interview first, to chat with them, and to build a trusting relationship. After I adopted this approach—by attending HT events and mingling with the people afterward—the Hizbis' attitude changed dramatically; in Sydney, they became more open and many agreed to an interview. Moreover, I learnt that the kind of questions one asks plays a vital role in conducting a good interview. Questions should be structured to avoid sensitive terms and instead should reference specific elements that will lead the conversation toward sensitive topics of interest. For instance, I wanted to learn more about HT's anti-Western worldview, with a specific focus on the modern state.

As using terms such as "radical, anti-Western vision of the state" would have appeared biased and might upset the participants, I simply asked, "What is your idea of an effective state-system?" and "What are the main features of the current state-system you live in that you are not happy about?" These

questions immediately led the conversation toward the caliphate and to the Hizbis' vision of Western states as corrupt systems.

With regard to the data analysis, I learnt a lot by using thematic analysis. The latter is defined as a tool "for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 8). It allows me to uncover concepts embedded in the data, and it is suited for projects aimed at identifying new elements by means of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). Interpretive schemes are a key feature of thematic analysis and allowed me to combine analysis of the frequency of a theme with analysis of the entire subject under investigation.

Through thematic analysis, I was able to uncover some of the patterns and themes I had not noticed at first during the interviews. I initially analyzed the data through a word frequency query on NVivo, a software program for coding and analyzing text. NVivo was a very useful tool for exploring a significant amount of qualitative data. I learnt that it is essential to consider all themes emerging from the data, even those that do not seem relevant to the research project. It is essential to rigorously

explore the data collected, and NVivo categorization into nodes was very useful. Finally, thematic analysis served as a suitable tool for analyzing HT's appeal to young Muslims in the West as thematic analysis takes individuals' interpretations to be essential for explaining their conduct, activities, and views. By exploring the interviewees' answers to questions about how they perceived and internalized the group's ideology, thematic analysis helped explain how the HT-sponsored worldview became central to their lives.

Conclusion

After reflecting on my research experience, I am convinced that the recipe for a good research project mostly consists of five essential elements. First, it is vital to carefully choose a pertinent research topic. This choice requires a lot of preliminary research in a specific field to identify what has already been addressed in the literature and what is still to be explored. It is essential for the researcher to find his or her own niche in the literature and identify the gaps he or she wants to fill with his or her research project. Once this is done, the second step is to design an adequate research method, which must be tailored to the population under analysis. Whether you

are dealing with groups, individuals, politicians, or sensitive social categories, it is crucial to identify—before commencing fieldwork—an adequate research design that allows the researcher to conduct his or her project in the most efficient way.

In particular, researchers need to determine the following three elements when designing a method: feasible methods for accessible data collection, the theoretical framework to interpret the data collected (in my case constructivism), and the analytic strategy (how to analyze the data collected). These three elements need to be carefully tailored to the object under analysis, after a thorough preliminary assessment and subject to small adjustments during the researcher's fieldwork.

Once these elements are decided, the researcher can move on to the third step: planning the fieldwork. The choice of location(s) is vital: It needs to be functional, with several opportunities for the investigator to come into contact with the population he or she intends to research. The fourth step involves data analysis and is a very delicate phase that should not be rushed. Data need to be navigated, explored, and re-visited until the researcher can see clear patterns, themes, or

values in the case of quantitative analysis. During this phase, using specific software (such as NVivo in my case) can be useful to hasten the analysis and to easily identify the results.

Finally, the last element to ensure a good research project is flexibility. The researcher needs to be ready to radically alter his or her initial plans, to change his or her preferences, and to find alternative sources of data in case the original sources are no longer available. I have also learnt that patience goes hand-in-hand with flexibility and represents an essential element for interacting with people regardless of their religious, social, or political belonging.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. In the phase preceding the fieldwork, why do you think the preliminary research is essential?
2. What is the ideal attitude a researcher should have during his or her work in the field?
3. Do you imagine fieldwork as a relaxing or stressful experience? Why?
4. What challenges do you envisage facing during your research project?

5. Which of the lessons learnt by the author do you value the most and consider useful for your research?

6. Imagine you are doing fieldwork researching a minority group in France. Contrary to your original plan, none of the potential participants are willing to be interviewed. What would you do? How would you collect the data you need?

Further Reading

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