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Research Note: 'How Can I Get Them Offstage?' – Critical Reflections on a Researcher's Approach to Qualitative Data Collection with Social Workers Involved in Preventing Violent Extremism in Norway

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Abstract

Researching sensitive topics, such as individuals about whom concern for radicalisation and violent extremism has been raised, demands a thoroughly contemplated approach. This is necessary for establishing trust with and accessing the research project's target group. As many projects are directed at professionals involved in the efforts to prevent violent extremism, and some of these workers have been found to struggle with this issue, the question should also be raised of how to approach these individuals in research. This paper draws on my experience from fieldwork throughout 2018, during which qualitative research was carried out through 17 in-depth interviews and two focus group interviews with experienced social workers involved in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism in Norway. This reflection started early in the data collection from the observation of participants being 'onstage' during interviews, appearing disconnected from their story. Applying Fook and Gardner's framework for critically reflective practice throughout the research process brought forth insights into researcher behaviour and sensitivity. 'Warming them up' and the 'specificity of practitioner experience' emerged as methodological themes from this reflective analytical process. These findings share commonalities with sensitive client work and research targeting individuals at risk of radicalisation; the researcher must be patient and thoughtful before he or she starts digging. The responsibility for the lack of rich descriptions therefore belongs to the researcher, who must cast a critical eye on his or her own research practice. In addition, asking specific questions raises concerns about the findings' validity if probing and closed-ended questions are not balanced with open-ended ones.

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Introduction

The background for this paper is an ongoing research project seeking to explore and analyse the experiences of Norwegian social workers engaged in preventing radicalisation and violent

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extremism in Norway. The research is conducted through both in-depth and focus-group interviews. However, this paper is not concerned with the findings from the actual study but rather the experience of researching a sensitive issue, in this case violent extremism.

First, what is a sensitive study topic? The term 'sensitive', as presented by Brewer (2012), is used in combination with gender, time, or culture to refer to how a topic is of concern to or dependent on these prefixes. In this paper, I utilise Sieber and Stanley's (1988) definition of sensitive topics: 'Studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research, or for the class of individuals represented by the research' (p. 49). Based on this definition, the topic of radicalisation or violent extremism fits within the frame of a sensitive topic. Being labelled 'radicalised' can be of major concern, as this may have social consequences for those involved, through both stigmatisation (van de Weert & Eijkman, 2019) and the obvious consequences of judicial persecution. This may to some extent explain why these individuals are considered hard-to-reach research participants (Larsen, 2020). For practitioners, I argue that radicalisation is a sensitive issue because no clear-cut definition of the term exists (Neumann, 2013). While its causes have not yet been fully uncovered (Bennett, 2019), research has identified factors such as a sense of insignificance (Jasko et al., 2017; Webber et al., 2018), social ostracism (Hales & Williams, 2018), and mental health issues (Grønnerød & Hellevik, 2016) as influencing the process. The topic of radicalisation is riddled with uncertainty, possibly causing it to become a sensitive topic for those engaged in preventing it.

This paper's empirical point of departure was in early 2018, when data collection began for an ongoing research project about preventing radicalisation and violent extremism in Norway. In the following, I will present the experiences, reflections, and researcher adjustments made in the initial phase of data collection. Lastly, this methodological piece offers suggestions to other qualitative researchers exploring topics related to extremism or terrorism.

Reflective Approach to Research

Reflection is a crucial cognitive practice when conducting research (Dahlberg et al., 2008), and engaging in structured work with one's own experiences is important in professional learning (Mann, 2016). Hence, to examine and create an understanding of my experiences from data collection, I will approach it from a critical reflection perspective, as described by Fook and Gardner (2007), to possibly undercover my own attitudes or behaviours that may have influenced the participants in the research situation. As I do not know how the participants themselves experienced how I interviewed them, the pursuit of that perspective rests purely on speculative grounds.

Introduction to critical reflection

Since the 1980s, research on reflective practice has evolved from, among others, Donald Schön's work regarding knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action (as cited in Ramage, 2017). Fook (2015, p. 441) states that the terms 'critical reflection' and 'reflective practice' are often used interchangeably to identify the thoughts and assumptions underlying practice. Fook and Gardner's (2007) model of critical reflection aims to unsettle the dominant thinking in professional practices to open the mind to other ways of practising (p. 51). This might be used in both professional social work and research to unsettle thinking, unearth hidden 'data' and assumptions, and evaluate and change practice. While their model is mainly used in groups of people, often co-workers, with introductory training and group sessions, in this case I will use questions derived from the model and apply them to the research situation. This will take the form of autoreflection, where specific questions are asked 'about' the empirical situation.

The terminology used by both Schön and Fook and Gardner has commonalities with several other authors, such as Mason (2002), who uses the term 'systematic noticing' of one's own practice, or Riemann (2007), who focuses on the ethnographic approach to one's own practice. Both Riemann (2007) and Fook and Gardner (2007) encourage students and

researchers to reflect upon their own practice by 'shaking it up'. In this paper, I will use Fook and Gardner's (2007) framework, divided into two steps of critical inquiry. The questions in Table 1 are not the entire set of questions that can be applied but only an excerpt found relevant in this particular case. These are presented by Fook and Gardner (2007) as methods of conducting critical reflection in the practice field (p. 75) and thus provide this paper with a practical method for using critical reflection. The purpose of the two stages is (1) to reveal assumptions about the subject that influence the situation, and (2) to change practice and theories about practice. This critical reflective structure will be applied to the experiences from my initial data collection.

Table 1 – Questions for critical reflection

Stages of action and reflection	**1. Factors influencing the situation**	**2. Researcher's actions**
Stage one (retrospectively)	- How did I/others influence the situation? - How did I/others influence my/others' perceptions? - How did I/others influence my/others' assumptions and values?	- How did I influence the situation through my presence, my actions, other people's perceptions of me, and my physical well-being on the particular day?
Stage two (prospectively)		- How might I have acted differently to influence the situation the way I wanted to?

Experiences from Data Collection

My ongoing research project focuses on the experiences of Norwegian social workers and how they understand, experience, and handle their work of preventing radicalisation and violent extremism through follow-up services and multiagency work. This was carried out

through focus group interviews and in-depth interviews with individual participants. Both were audio-recorded, and I also took field notes during and after meetings. Ideally, such notes should be written shortly after the interactions with participants, when the researcher's memory is fresh (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The majority of these notes were written directly after the interviews or between interviews. They consist of thoughts and reflections on what we discussed and topics such as the participants' nonverbal behaviour and my initial thoughts on the meaning of that behaviour (Berger, 2015; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). These field notes serve as the main empirical base for this paper.

The following experience from the first interviews in 2018 led me to question my approach. First, the practitioners I engaged with are to be understood as experienced in both social work in general and with issues of radicalisation and violent extremism. Most are the sole professional in their agency who manages these cases and the go-to person for others about concerns of radicalisation in other cases. As such, they are local and regional experts in the field of radicalisation and violent extremism, and some have been involved in local workshops and the training of others.

I observed during the interviews that the participants appeared to be 'onstage', in Goffmanian terms, as if they were conducting lectures. This shone through in the interviews when I sought to explore their own experiences of carrying out this work. A surprisingly large number of descriptions were about how the municipality had organised and conducted their work and how they had strategised to interact with various cooperating agencies. As such, they described their work more from the outside than from their actual social work practice with clients. This led to, in my interpretation, a story disconnected from themselves that revolved more around policy, terminology, and societal issues than around their own experience when engaging with clients. As a clinical social worker with many years of experience with client work, I assumed the meeting between myself and the research participants would go smoothly. To some extent, it did, but not in the way I had assumed prior to engaging with them. Their stories gave the impression of having been told many times

before, as if they were on 'auto-pilot'. These initial thoughts and notes from data collection led me to more do a more systematic exploration and reflection on my research approach.

Critical Reflection on the Qualitative Research Approach

My reflections' point of departure are my notes from the data collection, both during and after, as well as insights from myself and others after I presented the above situation to two different networks of researchers. This section will be structured in the following way. My reflections on what happened will be understood first through the lens of factors outside the research situation and my own background, and second through my own interaction with the participants. Third, my reflections led to an alternative interview approach, and this will be presented along with what appeared to be its consequences.

In Table 2, short excerpts of field notes are provided to give insight into my initial thoughts from data collection. They are written in non-academic language, sometimes spontaneously, to capture the thoughts and reflections as they occur, and originally in Norwegian. Following these short excerpts, I will present reflections derived from the questions I presented above in Table 1 ('**Questions for critical reflection**').

Table 2 – Excerpts from field notes
'Talks about the system a lot. Resists getting specific about what s/he does in detail?'
'Deflects, or avoids, topics of interaction?'
'It's more about the stuff "around" the work than the actual work'.
'Massively experienced. Hard to sort through it all'.
'Like s/he presses play. Might have talked about some of this before. Struggled to create pauses for reflection and thinking stuff through'.

Factors Influencing the Situation

The insider, or practitioner-researcher, is often characterised as someone with intimate knowledge of the community and the members who are being researched (Drake & Heath, 2010). Practitioner-researchers are often broken down into two categories: 'insiders' or 'outsiders' (Reed & Procter, 1995). Some scholars have found this binary distinction to be somewhat limiting (Brown, 1996; Drake & Heath, 2010), claiming that there are more layers and complexity to the topic. For nuances between the roles presented by Brown (1996) in the context of police research, please see Table 3.

Table 3 – Researcher position

	Insider	**Outsider**
Insider	A sworn police officer conducting police research	A formally sworn police officer now working as an academic
Outsider	A civilian employed by the police	A civilian not working for the police, such as an academic

Regardless of the different research context (i.e., social work vs. policing), the distinction does provide some understanding of my research position. As a social worker for 15 years, I am now involved in research on social workers and also take part in their education. While I am familiar with social work in general, I have limited experience in working to prevent violent radicalisation and extremism. Regardless, I would position myself as an insider-outsider.

An insider, regardless of the research field, has a set of preconceptions or hypotheses of what he or she might find during research. As stated earlier in this paper, I commenced data collection with the preconception that I, as somewhat of an insider with skills from professional practice, would help the dialogue flow naturally and stimulate the participants to

genuinely reflect upon their experiences. Retrospectively, I found this preconception to be wrong and somewhat naïve, as it did not treat the qualitative research context with a sufficient amount of respect.

While we do not know how the participants experienced being interviewed by me, we can gaze towards how the context of their work might influence them in the interview situation. In the Nordic countries, radicalisation and violent extremism are considered a significant threat that poses a serious challenge to the countries' security, democracy, and social cohesion (Rambøll Management Consulting, 2017). Additionally, the term *radicalisation* is unquestionably linked to terrorism as a possible endpoint of the radicalisation process (Lombardi et al., 2015; Silke et al., 2008). Based on the above, the seriousness of preventing radicalisation and violent extremism becomes clear, as it potentially places a heavy burden on the practitioners' shoulders. This work has been found to cause uncertainty in some workers regarding how to identify and handle cases where concern for radicalisation has been raised (Chisholm & Coulter, 2017; Dryden, 2017; Lid et al., 2016). Also, professionals involved in this multiagency work have been found to use different forms of logic to make sense of their task and how to do it (Sivenbring & Malmros, 2020). These factors from outside the actual research setting might influence the interview situation as well, thus adding to the stress that some participants may experience during data collection (Dempsey et al., 2016; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).

Researcher's Actions

This section builds upon the above, as my actions were the consequence of my assumptions going into this research process. Going through the field notes, what struck me as notable is how my focus was more on what they did and said, and less on my actions. However, the last two short excerpts from the field notes presented earlier are directed towards myself. Both highlight my struggle to establish a structure for exploring what I had planned, as well as creating spheres where the participants actually took a step back and thought things through before they answered. Regardless of my competency in

communicating with people, lacking a clear and critical eye towards myself prior to and during the interview process may have produced an environment that was not sufficiently secure (Burkett & Morris, 2015; Kingsley et al., 2010; Råheim et al., 2016). This might have caused a barrier to exploring the deeply felt experiences and emotions involved in this prevention work. Through the review of field notes and the interview guide and by simply trying to look back at how I initiated the interviews, I realised that I might have started exploring something deeply sensitive without having properly established an environment for it (Marais & Van der Merwe, 2016). This insight came when I presented my initial experiences of doing qualitative research to my fellow PhD candidates and other departmental academic staff. One comment in particular, about looking at the qualitative research process through the lens of client work, led me to question how I proceeded to build trust towards the participants as well as the questions I asked to explore their experiences.

Analysis of the Methodological Problem and Its Solution

As previously presented, the participants responded as if they were going into character or were onstage, and they appeared to give answers as if they were on 'auto-pilot', disconnected from themselves. Going on 'auto-pilot' is a known phenomenon when researchers themselves are not sufficiently present when conducting interviews (Tracy, 2020; Weller, 2017). While this does not relate to the research participants, and I have failed to identify literature that specifically focuses on participants, the same phenomenon may be applicable to research participants as well. Trust and security, on the other hand, are recognised as elements that need to be established before researching sensitive topics through interviews (Guest et al., 2012; Råheim et al., 2016; Seidman, 2006). Participants may also be inclined to say what they think the researcher is interested in (Anderson, 2010). Following this, I understood participants' trust and confidence in me as a researcher as the main barriers to eliciting rich and personal descriptions of practice and experiences. Based on the above, two simple strategies were devised for the following interviews and, later, the focus group interviews.

'Warming Them Up'

The first was to, if possible, invest more time in establishing a calmer and more secure environment to conduct the interviews. This was done primarily at the onset of the interviews but also, to some degree, through pre-interview communication on telephone. Small talk and further comments about the research project served as two important components in this phase. Time has been found to be an essential part of building trust in personal relationships (Weber & Carter, 2012) and in professional social work with clients (Weinstein et al., 2000). While qualitative interviews are social interactions that often happen only once and last for about one to two hours (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Jamshed, 2014; Seidman, 2006), they still consist of one person meeting another. The experiences in building trust in personal relationships and professional social work therefore may also be applicable, to some degree, to this research context. Due to the time limit of the interaction, the researcher must quickly demonstrate respect for the participants and encourage them to share their perspectives and experiences of sensitive matters (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Seidman, 2006).

Specificity of Practitioner Experience

The second strategy, to get the participants 'offstage', involved asking questions that were directly related to their experiences, such as 'Think of a specific case that you worked on. What kinds of strategies did you use when you engaged directly with that particular client?' This question, and other similar ones, aimed at pulling the participants into their practice experience, facilitating a mode of reflection less influenced by factors like the municipality's local action plan, the publicly stated strategy, or what the participant might think is the ideal practice. This strategy also incorporated closed-ended follow-up questions. These types of questions are often referred to as 'intermediate questions' or 'specifying questions' (Bryman, 2012), as they are neither fully open- nor closed-ended. Following the two strategies presented above (i.e., 'warming up' the participants and adapting a more specifying questioning for some aspects of the interview), the participants' stories changed

accordingly. The strategies brought forth more personal descriptions of how the participants conducted their work and how they experienced it on an emotional level.

Concluding remarks

While eliciting highly relevant and interesting experiences, the process of asking specifying questions may have created a potential backdrop that prevented the participants from freely reflecting on and expressing their experience. The use of this strategy could imply that the 'pure' explorative aspect of qualitative research in general may be in jeopardy. While the participants initially did talk more freely, their reflections and the sensitive topics were less present. With this in mind, the semi-open specifying questions should be used in delicate balance with open-ended ones to ensure that both the researcher's hypothesis and the practitioners' perspectives are explored in combination.

The findings from this critical reflection on data collection have revealed well-known issues in qualitative research on sensitive topics, such as trust and respect in the 'research room'. It has also brought forth reflections on how the seriousness of the work to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism might also influence practitioners' openness to sharing their experiences with a researcher.

At the present time, the root causes of radicalisation have not yet been revealed, but a variety of social and psychological risk factors have been identified (Jasko et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2018). This may have contributed to the participants' 'sticking to their script' and being 'onstage' in the initial phase of contact in the interviews.

Qualitative research is widely criticised for lacking rigour and transparency regarding collecting and analysing data (Brink, 1993; Leung, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). While my effort to add an extra degree of focus to this research has not added rigour, it did narrow the scope of the work by adding a tighter structure to the interviews. This might, if not properly balanced by more open (-ended) questions, risk reducing the research's validity by leaning more heavily towards the researcher's assumptions. The process of rewriting the interview

guide and approach after the first in-depth interviews led to a more balanced and practice-focused exploration of the practitioners' experience. The critical reflection framework by Fook and Gardner (2007) and comments from colleagues served as the two main mechanisms for identifying and transforming this process. The reflection on and supervision of one's own work have been found to help social-work professionals reveal values that influence their work, improve well-being, and bolster professional development (Ducharme et al., 2007; Hughes, 2010; Ixer, 2003; Yürür & Sarikaya, 2012). While these particular findings are from professional social work, supervision is an important aspect of research as well (Carter et al., 2016; Manathunga, 2005).

Suggestions for Qualitative Researchers within Topics of Extremism and Terrorism

Following the description and remarks above, this section provides researchers with suggestions on how to engage with practitioners and other research participants within the fields of extremism or terrorism. One approach is to make an extra effort to present the research project to potential participants and underline the study's focus on the interviewees' subjective experience and thoughts

Qualitative research is not about establishing a truth nor measuring the validity or 'correctness' of a strategy or interpretation of a phenomenon (Smith, 2018). Rather, it is about doing a deep dive into the participants' subjective experience (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Seidman, 2006). Taking my experience into account, the researcher can invest more time in getting to know the participants, and vice versa, to build the necessary trust and security to explore a highly sensitive research topic before posing the deeper questions.

If or when the participant seems ready and open to explore the more sensitive subjects, the researcher can work his or her way down from the general to the specific to let the participant further 'warm up'. While the researcher may be well-read in and familiar with the literature on extremism and terrorism and all its uncertainties, the research participants may not be. Avoid questions that put the participants 'on the spot' in terms of doing something right or wrong, as these concepts have been found to be very elusive in our research field.

Also, it is helpful to be specific and individually oriented, and then follow the participants' trail of thought and reflections on the questions being asked of them. While it is common to have developed a mental or physical list of topics to explore during interviews, balance this list of topics with long journeys into points that surface and are perhaps surprising during the interactions with the research participants. This balancing act, though difficult to carry out, may help the researcher to explore his or her initial assumptions and thoughts going into the project, as well as those with which the participants (hopefully) may bring up spontaneously during the discussions.

These suggestions focus specifically on research concerning practitioners in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism However, the same issues of trust and sensitivity (and probably more) might be useful to take note of when engaged in research on individuals harbouring extremist ideologies or supporting extremist organisations. Following the reflections in this paper, novel researchers within the qualitative tradition are encouraged to share their experiences and approaches with colleagues and peers. This process might cause some vulnerability and stress, but these are natural reactions to personal and professional development. Lastly, this methodological piece provides one experience that in my opinion shows a responsibility that lies with the researcher, not the participants. This includes establishing the necessary trust, respect, and sensitivity towards the participants' time, position, and experience in a practice field full of uncertainties and challenges.

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