

Doing Politics

Spies as Informants: Triangulation and the Interpretation of Elite Interview Data in the Study of the Intelligence and Security Services

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This article examines the application of ‘triangulation’ to the use of elite interviewing in political science, with specific reference to the study of the intelligence and security services. It is argued that the problems involved in using elite interviews in security and intelligence studies are no different than in other areas of political science, but simply more pronounced. It is further argued that these problems can be most effectively addressed in terms of the sociological ‘triangulation’ strategy of multi-methodological research. The article concludes that this approach is, moreover, generally applicable to political studies at large.

Introduction

In his 1996 article in *Politics* on doing elite interviews, David Richards winds up with the intellectual cliffhanger that, on completing his programme of interviews, ‘the interviewer has now reached one of the most important stages – analysing the information provided by the interviewees. This, in itself, is no small task’ (Richards, 1996, pp. 203–204). It is indeed no small task, and the problems and options in handling interview data, elite or otherwise, have been a major issue in sociological discussion for decades. For the most part, however, the solutions and options developed in sociological literature have had only the most limited dissemination outside that field. This is regrettable in view of the widespread concern with the issue in almost every branch of the social sciences. There is, however, one field of political studies in which the issues of elite interviewing are particularly pronounced, and that is the study of intelligence and security agencies. In the following discussion, I propose to show how the application of certain sociological concepts to the problems of elite interviewing applied to security and intelligence studies can provide tools of more general use to political scientists, even where their research interest is less sensitive and fraught with secrecy than studying espionage.

Information about the intelligence services is notoriously sparse (undoubtedly a major reason that security and intelligence studies remains a minority interest in political science), and the official documentary records available at sites such as the Public Record Office and India Office Library of Records have been ‘sanitised’, with so-called ‘weederers’ trying to remove any trace of British intelligence information

from available archives. On the whole, the 'weeder' have proven a lot less successful than Her Majesty's Government might have wished (Andrew, 1984, pp. 43–65), and since the Major administration's 1993 'open government' initiative, the quality of the documentary record available has improved dramatically. However, it continues to be necessary to substitute interviews for official documents in many areas, particularly concerning the post-1946 history of Britain's intelligence machinery. Contemporary analytical studies such as Peter Gill's *Policing Politics* (1994) and Ian Leigh and Lawrence Lustgarten's *In From the Cold* (1994) both rely extensively on interviews to enrich and interpret the arcane and often vaguely worded intelligence reviews, inquiries and legislation (Leigh and Lustgarten in particular depend upon information from then-Intelligence Co-ordinator Sir Gerald Warner in their 'Coda on the 1994 Intelligence Services Act' (1994, pp. 493–516)), while Christopher Andrew's massively researched *Secret Service* (1987) frequently falls back on that unfortunately opaque convention of historical writing, 'private information'. A recent project on the institutional development on the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) included a programme of interviews with 13 former SIS personnel, interviewed in depth concerning organisation and management in that agency (Davies, 1997 and 2000), and in this context it proved necessary to develop some sort of a systematic approach to correlating their information with other available sources, and each other.

The Inevitability of Interviews

Secrecy and secret services do not, however, represent a unique case. Rather, they bring into sharp relief endemic problems in the pursuit of political science in general, and more specifically in the United Kingdom. The British government is one of the most secretive democratic governments, and the notorious section 3(4) of the Public Records Act, retaining documents indefinitely, affects many other areas besides the study of intelligence and security services. Moreover, the intrinsic limitations of archival sources mitigate against complete reliance on documentary sources in almost every area of social-scientific research. Although the clarity and what might be termed in Pentagonese the 'survivability' of documentary records make them in many respects the preferred sources of historical information, documentary sources are by no means unassailable. The limitations of the British public archives have been summarised by the historians Sean Glynn and Alan Booth who note three problems particularly relevant here: (1) Cabinet papers are incomplete and thereby potentially misleading; (2) they draw one's attention to the formal 'administrative process' of policy-making rather than the substantive causes and effects of that policy; (3) finally, much like memoirs, Cabinet, departmental and 'other political papers' tend to have what Glynn and Booth call a 'self-justificatory element' (1979, p. 315). The authors even note that at least one case exists where a participant in the Cabinet process has claimed on the basis of his first-hand experience of the meetings in question that the official record was *intentionally* misrepresentative out of political expediency (Richard Crossman contested the accuracy of state papers in his memoirs on a number of occasions (Glynn and Booth, 1979, p. 305)). They conclude, therefore, that 'There is a real need for historians to check evidence from the State papers against whatever alternative sources are available' (Glynn and Booth, 1979, p. 315). What the authors do not

explicitly deal with is that, on the whole, the minutes of committee meetings such as the Cabinet or Committee of Imperial Defence often tend to mask over the political processes of debate and discussion and record only that which was or could be agreed upon. This is particularly true of the papers of the Joint Intelligence Committee, a body with an explicit ethos of seeking joint consensus (Herman, 1995, pp. 23–24). Such a limited record can potentially conceal a multitude of sins. The problems of archival incompleteness have also been noted by Anthony Seldon and Joanna Papworth in their *By Word of Mouth: 'Elite' Oral History* (1983), concluding that interviews are in fact a necessary supplement to documentary records. Indeed, this is much the same rationale for interviews provided by Richards (1996, p. 100).

What Glynn and Booth are advocating in items (1) and (3) above, and Seldon and Papworth throughout their volume, points in the direction of the historiographic equivalent of the sociological device of multi-methodological 'triangulation' in social science research. The triangulation concept is, in its original conception, a counter to the limitations of the survey-based research which was the prevalent form of social science research methodology during the 1960s (Webb et al., 1966, pp. 12–27). In their original formulation of the triangulation strategy, Webb et al. do indeed discuss the use of official archives, but their goal is gleaning quantitative sociological rather than qualitative sociological information from archives (1966, ch.3 and ch.4). The goal is, however, to provide a cross-reference between interview or questionnaire data and archival records. Webb et al. argue that 'the most fertile search for validity comes from a combined series of measures, each with its own idiosyncratic weaknesses, each pointed to a single hypothesis' (1966, p. 174). They conclude, therefore, that 'with studies of social change, the most practical method is to rely on available records, supplemented by verbal recall' (*ibid.*, p. 179). The goal of triangulation is, so to speak, to provide a parallax view upon events.

A complication exists in the combination of oral and archival evidence in compiling a qualitative developmental account. That is, the use of different standpoints for qualitative perception rather than quantitative measurement means that one not only sees the same thing from a different angle, one sees entirely different facets of that thing. Thus the point of view in one particular document may reveal entirely different features of some historical item from other documents, or of a witness or group of witnesses, and they in turn may provide information additional to that in the documentary record. Thus while the arguments of Webb et al. in some degree parallel those of Booth and Glynn, or Seldon and Papworth, the fundamental difference exists that Webb's use of multiple methodologies is purely corroborative, while that employed by the historian is *additive* as well as corroborative. Due to the very fragmentary nature of the archival record on the intelligence community, it is particularly necessary to adopt the combined approach, in which interview evidence can provide information additional to documentary materials, as well as corroborative information. However, precisely because of that need to employ oral evidence, it is also crucial to provide a process of interpretation, collation and analysis more explicit and transparent than cursory references to 'senior officials' or 'private information'. As a consequence, any such strategy of interpretation, collation and analysis will very extensively drive or determine the operational design of the interview programme itself.

Elite Interviewing in Security and Intelligence Studies

Elite interviewing is a central tool in the study of intelligence and security services, not least because intelligence is something created by, of and for the policy-forming and decision-making elites in national government. The study of SIS referred to above, examining the structural, institutional development of the SIS from its inception until the middle decades of the Cold War, inevitably referred to a more narrowly defined 'elite' than is usually the case, specifically former SIS personnel who could help assemble both a series of time-frame pictures of structure and process in the SIS, and a sequential sense of how that structure and process evolved. Because of the very secrecy surrounding such people and their work, assembling a set of interviewees depended very heavily on a strategy of 'snowballing', or asking each interviewee to recommend one or more other potential contacts. Where possible, respondents were interviewed on two or more occasions, either in person or by telephone, as well as written correspondence. This was proved necessary for two main reasons. In the first place, once an interview was completed and the content transcribed, uncertainties and ambiguities in the information would become apparent. In the second place, as will be discussed in greater detail below, new and unexpected information almost always appeared, creating a need for a subsequent interview with the respondent providing that information, and a need to go back to earlier respondents as additional sources of verification and elaboration. On completing transcription of the interviews, copies of the transcripts were forwarded to the respondents to try to ensure that the representation of the respondents' information was as accurate as possible.

Because of the ages of the former officers interviewed, the interviews themselves were less an exercise in 'guided conversation' than in 'guided reminiscence'. In general, interviews in sociology are divided into structured and unstructured types. Structured interviews are conducted on the basis of a strictly worded and sequenced series of questions. Unstructured interviews, sometimes referred to as 'in-depth' interviews or 'guided conversations' rely less on a fixed schedule than a series of topics to be covered and/or prompts intended to direct the respondent in particular directions of interest to the researcher(s). Structuring is something of a matter of degree, and so there is a broad, grey area of 'semi-structured' interview strategies in which the wording or order of the questions on the schedule can be altered in real time by the researcher conducting the interview. The research design discussed here employed a semi-structured method, one that employed both relatively highly structured and relatively unstructured components at different points. To start with, when going in to talk to someone about their career, it is crucial to know what that career was and, if possible, its most important features relevant to the interview. Intelligence officer careers are, however, endemically secret things and this therefore posed an initial hurdle in schedule design. One could not very well go into the interview with a vast 'shopping list' of requirements and queries, most of which would not be relevant to the informant, not merely because of the wasted time but also because the sense of frustration coupled to that inefficiency could easily undercut any attempt to develop a working rapport. Consequently, each interview schedule was composed of three distinct stages – a relatively unstructured initial phases followed by two more highly structured

stages. The unstructured initial phase invited respondents to give a life-account of their career, from which it was possible to select those questions from the general-purpose shopping list that the respondent could address. The third, structured stage occurred in the event of subsequent interviews, and was a supplementary shopping list intended to draw out additional information about any new items of information that emerged during the previous two stages. Once completed, there was also a need to find a way to refer to the interview data as explicitly as possible while retaining the confidentiality of the informants, but without resorting to the vagueness and opacity of conventions such as 'private information'. The solution to this problem was also drawn from sociological methodology (which very commonly delves into sensitive and confidential matters such as sexuality, the family and healthcare), and that was to assign to each informant a serial number and refer to information from that informant in terms of that serial number, for example 'Information from I-28'.

Triangulation and the Evaluation of Elite Interview Data

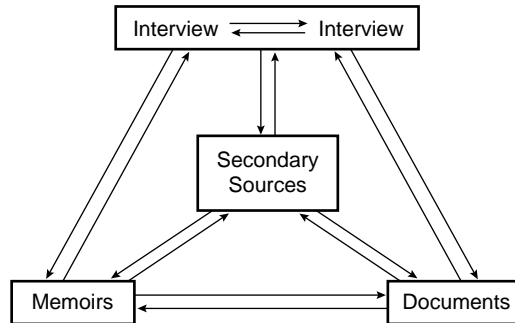
The epistemological status of information elicited through qualitative interviewing is, necessarily, another fraught matter. In general, sociological views of qualitative interview data tend to be cast in terms of the exploration of respondents' perceptions and sensibilities rather than the factual accuracy of those perceptions (see, for example, Mason, 1998, pp. 38–42). This mildly relativist position is one aspect of sociological methodological thought which does not transpose easily to historical and political studies. Qualitative historical interviewing is really about eliciting first-hand accounts, securing the evidence of witnesses, as it were (with the inevitable uncertainties such a metaphor implies). Thus the epistemological and methodological status of a historical interview is more akin to that of the memoir than anything else (see, for example, Gamble, 1994; also, with specific reference to the study of intelligence and security services, the debate between D.C. Watt and Lawrence Lustgarten in Watt, 1988 and 1989 and Lustgarten, 1989). That is, for most intents and purposes, memoirs are usable primary sources where the authors writes from first-hand experience; second-hand and hearsay information rapidly becomes increasingly unreliable the further the author was from the event. For the most part, these criteria of reliability are as applicable to qualitative historical interviews as they are to memoirs. There are also certain trade-offs between interview and memoir. In the case of the interview, the data will have a higher level of *validity* than the memoir (that is, having been collected in accordance with the specific needs of the project, it will have a better 'fit' to those needs), but the memoir as a published artefact is less volatile over time than memory, and hence possibly marginally more *reliable*.¹

The next problem is how to weight interview data in with, or possibly against, other classes of data in the assessment process. Three main criteria can generally be adopted for the additive use of oral history contributions: first, like the use of memoirs, the information has to be first-hand reporting; second is the level of access – a head of station reporting his unit's organisation would, for the most part, be viewed as more reliable than a junior officer who was doing the station legwork at the time; and thirdly is what might be called the informant's 'track record', their overall displayed reliability where the informant's recollections appear generally

sound when checked against other available sources. Seldon and Papworth advocate much the same criteria, and draw an analogy between processing oral history and the rules of witness evidence in English common law (Seldon and Papworth, 1983, pp. 125–129). However, alternative primary sources are not always available and in a number of cases interview data may be the only form of data available, or interview data coupled to information from secondary sources. Secondary sources have to be treated with considerable caution, not least because most of the published literature on intelligence has been based almost entirely on interviews, typically by journalists, with very little in the way of a rigorous methodology for collection, interpretation and evaluation.

Given the necessary reliance of intelligence studies on interviews and memoirs, arbitrarily mixing and matching the versions of events emerging from reported evidence is simply not a viable approach. The optimum solution appears to be a triangulation triad of primary sources (interviews, published first-hand accounts; and documentary sources (published or archival)), with published secondary-source information available in cautious reserve (see Figure 1). Information can then be cross-referenced both between and within the data types employed.

Figure 1: Triangulation sources



The most difficult aspect of this kind of triangulation process is not the process of corroboration through multiple sources, but the incorporation of additional information from first-hand accounts. Where interviews alone are the available source for a particular item, a good practice is that adopted by Nicholas Eftimiades in his study of Chinese foreign human intelligence operations; that is, a minimum of two independent interview sources are required for any item to be treated with any real confidence (Eftimiades, 1994, p. 11). The argument in this latter case is, essentially, a variation on the old information-theory strategy of improving the signal to noise ratio of a message by sending the same message down two redundant channels. That is, the noise on each 'channel' (i.e. each informant) is particular to that channel or individual but the signal is common to both, and so what they have in common is more likely to be signal than noise. In the SIS study, this was taken as a minimum criterion for the addition of any information from interview sources on their own, while interview data might be added to documentary information only when there was already evidence of consistency between

the two, i.e. indicating the probable reliability of the interview data on the subject at hand.² Where interviews came into conflict with other interviews or memoirs, if the item was small enough to be passed over in silence on the grounds that the results were unreliable, this was the preferred course. Where interviews or memoirs conflicted with written records, for the most part the written records were taken as the final authority. Where the item has proven too significant to be dropped from the historical narrative, then two options existed. In the first place, where a clear consensus, albeit not unanimity, was displayed, the majority view was adopted, although the uncertainty is reported in the source notes. Where a complete lack of consensus existed, and no documentary sources were available to tip the scales one way or the other, the practice was to report on the uncertainty in the text. In the last analysis, the basic rationale for an explicit strategy of triangulation is that where there exists such a palpable degree of uncertainty – as is endemic in the study of intelligence – if a particular version of events is to be adopted and presented as probably accurate (particularly in preference to alternative versions) there must be strong, clearly defined and articulated criteria for making that judgement.

Conclusion

Nine years ago, it could indeed be argued that what intelligence studies needed was not a combination of speculation and bemoaning the incompleteness of the documentary record, but rather ‘better use ... of what records do exist and of systematic methods of enquiry, such as structured interviewing of former intelligence officers’ (Robertson, 1987, p. 98). Such an approach does, indeed, have considerable potential when combined with and added to alternative sources in a strategy of triangulation, whether the triangulation strategy is corroborative, additive or both. Perhaps more significantly, given the pervasive secrecy of the British government at large, such a strategy of triangulation is inevitably of far more general use than simply the study of so-called ‘secret services’. Government secrecy is a major problem for anyone doing any branch of political studies in the United Kingdom, while intrinsic difficulties with other sources, such as self-serving biases in published sources and unavoidable incompleteness in documentary archives, mean that the need for qualitative elite interviewing is a general one, and therefore the need for a systematic approach to evaluating that data and integrating it with information from different types sources is also a general one.

Notes

1 There also exists a peculiar, marginal category of memoir where the author has fortified their personal recollections with reference to documents in their possession. In the study of the British Secret Intelligence Service, for example, there are three particularly notable examples: Compton Mackenzie’s three volumes of memoirs (1931, 1939 and 1940) make extensive use of surviving correspondence in Mackenzie’s possession 20 years after the events recounted; R.V. Jones’s *Most Secret War* (1978) was written on the basis of an extensive private holding of surviving intelligence-related materials, while more recently Nigel Clive employed similar papers to reproduce political intelligence reports submitted to SIS Far East and detailed mule-and-agent expenses of running his late wartime Greek intelligence networks in his *Greek Experience* (1985). A somewhat ambiguous case is accounts such as J.G. Beevor’s *SOE: Recollections and Reflections 1940–45* (1981), written with the aid of document summaries released to him by the Foreign Office. Similarly, during my interviews, a couple of respondents referred to documents in their possession or to which they had access. Much as one would treat memoirs of the type described as being more reliable than accounts drawn purely from memory, so this type of interview data has to be given greater weight than pure recollection.

2 Just because a source is reliable on one matter does not guarantee reliability on everything about which they provide an account.

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