

Researching Non-State Actors in International Security: Theory and Practice; Andreas Kruck and Andrea Schneiker (eds.); Abingdon; Routledge; 2017; Hardcover, £84; ISBN: 978 1 138 94782 5; e-book available.

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Research, across the board, is becoming more formalised. Whether an ethnographic study, comparative case study or experiment, the list of prescriptions that comes with our methodological choices is growing. This is not necessarily a negative development: transparent descriptions of methodological choices give the reader handles to assess the intent and quality of a study. But method should not suffocate. Where our messy social reality meets a researcher's practical limitations, trade-offs have to be made – especially in (post-)conflict settings where access may be dangerous, difficult or nearly impossible.

This edited volume balances that fine line between stylized method which allows scholars to make inferences and the messy social reality of security studies forcing trade-offs. Andreas Kruck and Andrea Schneiker brought together scholars from different backgrounds to reflect upon methods 'in use'. Focussing, albeit not exclusively, on non-state actors in international security the chapters cover a range of approaches – from narrative and sentiment analysis, case study methods and interviewing, to field-experiments and immersion – with a particular eye on the implementation and (dis-)advantages of these methods. The book therewith offers an overview of what is methodologically possible but is also honest about what is difficult.

The central question the book addresses is how to use which method and when? The individual chapters each address a particular method in relation to a particular security actor. Most importantly, the chapters discuss how the researchers used their toolboxes in practice and the challenges they encountered.

Chapters that stand out in that regard are Alexander Spencer's chapter which introduces 'narrative analysis' and re-traces narratives of the Libyan rebellion against Muammar Gaddafi; Joakim Berndtsson's discussion of 'content analysis' and his in-depth case study of Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) as 'security experts' in Sweden; and Alexander de Juan's introduction of 'geo-spatial analysis' in relation to militia violence and migration in Dafur, Sudan. These chapters offer particularly well-balanced introductions of their respective methods, combined with practical examples and critical reflections of the limits of their designs.

Other chapters offer more focussed introductions of a particular method or tool. Anja Mihr's chapter on interviewing techniques discusses the sensitivities of conducting interviews in (post-)conflict settings. Patrick Mello's chapter on Qualitative Comparative Analysis addresses

‘under which conditions-questions’ and analyses democratic participation in conflict and Andreas Kruck’s chapter on theory-guided case studies offers insights in combining cross case and within case (process tracing) inference. Less conventional methods, besides de Juan’s reflections on geo-spatial analysis, are presented by Magnus Dau and Marlen Martin who conducted sentiment analysis based on Twitter data from two PMSCs, Sabrina Karim’s chapter on in-the-field, controlled experiments in relation to gender reforms in the Liberian National Police and Tessa Diphoom’s participant observations of private security companies in Durban, South Africa.

The volume thus offers methodological insights into vastly different approaches and their respective strengths and weaknesses. The main strength of the volume is, however, that the individual chapters offer a rare glance into research *as it is actually practiced* as opposed to how it is, afterwards, presented.

That notwithstanding, the diversity of approaches also poses a challenge: How to organise them? The editors divided the volume into three sections – ‘interpreting texts’, ‘establishing causal claims’ and ‘doing field work’ – but the organisation is not quite intuitive. Interviewing techniques are discussed as ‘interpreting texts’ and not as ‘doing field work’, whilst chapters with a strong symbiosis – Berndtsson’s, Kruck’s and Coni-Zimmer and Wolf’s chapters each address qualitative case studies – are spread over the sections. Moreover, by subsuming diverse methods and ontologies under one heading they created a challenge for the ‘discussion chapters’ which conclude the sections. Although each offers a valuable contribution – Jutta Joachim reflects on what ‘text’ is and the subjectivities that shape our analysis, Bert-Jan Verbeek focusses on what is, according to him, missing (which are discussions of the causal mechanisms underlying the causal claims) and Jacqui True discusses the importance of reflexivity when doing field work – these chapters, in trying to address the diversity in their respective sections, remain somewhat unfocused.

Most difficult in that regard is Andreas Armbrorst’s chapter. Seemingly an introductory chapter conceptualizing political violence of non-state actors, the chapter takes a strong ontological stance on terrorism and causality that does not reflect the diversity and reflexivity of the other contributions. More fitting, perhaps, would have been to reflect on non-state actors in general, addressing what different conceptualisations would mean for the types of questions one asks and the research practices one follows. In that respect, Anna Leander’s closing chapter, reflecting on the challenges inherent to studying non-state security actors and her plea for ‘methodological openness and imagination’ may have suited better.

In all, the volume as a whole offers a valuable glance into the world of researching non-state actors in international security and is refreshingly open about the challenges and trade-offs most of us face in our work. I therefore warmly recommended it to all those studying the subject, although it will probably prove to be of particular interests to students – and thus to those teaching international security – and younger researchers.