

Joseph Soeters, Patricia M. Shields & Sebastian Rietjens (eds.), *Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, 336 pp.

Reviewed by Morten Brænder

As I suppose all teachers do, I always browse bookshelves, reviews and web-pages for useful textbooks within my field. Good research introductions make the lives of both teachers and students a lot easier. Foremost, they save time in the copy room from piecing together the right curriculum for your courses. They also offer everybody in class a common frame of reference as a safe point of departure before going off the beaten track and pursuing individual research questions. Accordingly, it was with great expectations that I received the Routledge *Handbook* for this review. And, before I express my concerns below, allow me to emphasize two complimentary points.

First, by publishing a *Handbook of Research in Military Studies*, Routledge has hit the nail on the head: there is a gap between Guiseppa Caforio's *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*¹ and the detailed introduction to particular research methods that students and researchers might address, when entering this particular, and often peculiar, field. Whereas Caforio's book is theoretical and (of course) centres on military sociology in particular, the focal point in Soeters et alii's *Handbook of Research* is the practical challenges that students encounter in military studies in general.

Second, the *Handbook* is a very good read. The chapters are well-written, and cover the diversity of the field excellently. Moreover, each entry uses an actual piece of research, in which the method in question was used in practice, as a point of departure. This is a brilliant idea. These introductions provide the reader with an overview of the classics (old as well as new) within military research. And they imply a very important point – probably the most important point in the book as a whole: what determines the quality of your research is not whether you prefer one methodological approach over another, but whether the method chosen enables you to answer your initial research question.

The *Handbook* does not choose a side in the qualitative versus quantitative quarrel (or in the constructivist vs. positivist quarrel for that matter). The main philosophy, a point which is mentioned both in the introduction and addressed thoroughly in three concluding chapters, is that research should be “problem-driven”. Further, the diversity of the *Handbook* is emphasised both by the approaches it covers and by the background of the contributors. Hence, the entries range from participant observation studies in conflict zones to Internet sources, from in-depth interviews to experimental studies. And the contributors

¹ Giuseppe Caforio (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*, New York, Springer, 2006.

come from many different countries. Of course, the home countries of the editors, the US and the Netherlands, are strongly represented. But the list of authors also includes contributors from for instance Australia, France, Israel, and Sweden.

All in all, I will not hesitate to recommend the *Handbook* to academics supervising graduate students, to those approaching the field of military studies for the first time, or to researchers who are familiar with the field but wish to approach it in a new way. Moreover, some of the insights offered by the *Handbook* will also be useful in more basic introductions to research methods. I teach political science students. They are, on the one hand, very proficient in using surveys and individual interviews. On the other hand, they know very little about observational studies. The chapters in the *Handbook* addressing that topic (chapters 2, 4, 6, and 10) would be very useful in presenting both the pros and cons of this particular approach, and in demonstrating how different methods can be used in practice.

My main concerns in regard to the *Handbook* lead me back to the starting point about textbooks. Although some chapters may be used in introductions to military studies or in basic introductions to particular research methods, the *Handbook* will mainly prove useful for the skilled students already on their way. As a textbook, it still lacks something in my opinion.

First, there is the price tag. Last time I checked you could acquire the *Handbook* for €151.77 (at amazon.de, without shipping expenses). And, whereas I find that the book is worth the money, I am not sure students would agree. (Hopefully, a subsequent paperback might be more economical).

Second, while the book is centred on data collection, only a few of the chapters specifically address other steps in the research process. Part II, titled “Qualitative methods”, contains six chapters on data collection, and only one devoted solely to data analysis. Pascal Venesson and Ina Wiesner’s chapter on “Process Tracing in Case Studies” (9) and Michael Griffin’s chapter on “Visual Communication Research and War” (13) contain some points on data analysis. Their main purpose is, nevertheless, to present what I would call “analytical approaches”: they are very useful in explaining *why* a particular method should be used, but do not provide much advice as to *how* it should be conducted. In fairness, the editors emphasize this in the introduction titled “What this book is, and what it is not.” In their view, this is a book for the graduate student who already has a basic knowledge about research methods, but still needs a helping hand in regard to this specific field of research. In that sense, the keen focus on data collection is justified: As the title of Eyal Ben-Ari and Yagil Levy’s chapter 2 indicates, one of the things really special about studying the military is “Getting Access to the Field,” and once you are there, to get good and useful data out of it.

Still, I am not sure that I completely understand the book’s overemphasis on data collection. As already mentioned above, much of the advice offered in regard to data collection does not apply only to military studies: For example, when conducting

longitudinal analyses, matching your data across time is always important. When conducting in-depth interviews, avoiding closed-ended questions is always important. Given that such advice on data collection applies to military studies and non-military studies alike, why should the same not be the case in regard to, for instance, research questions, research designs, operationalization, and methods of data analysis?

To be concrete, I think the book would be more broadly applicable if the structure closely followed the ideal structure of a research process. First, such a framework would make it easier for the reader to see the links between the entries, without relying on the very helpful but in my opinion too few cross-references in the book. Second, this would make it easier for the editors to “match” data collection and data analysis issues. For example, René Moelker’s chapter on “Participant Observation of Veteran Bikers” emphasizes that the “1% patch” is key to understanding the veteran bikers’ identity :

Some clearly equate the patch with Business Clubs like the Bandidos and the Hells Angels [...]. But to other bikers, like Jack, member of the Veterans MC, the patch only expresses solidarity with the tradition and history of motorcyclists and to him it signifies the band of brotherhood between bikers (p.112).

Clearly, as shown by this example, not only participant observers, but all observant researchers, should be open to the fact that the diversity of an entire research topic can be contained within a single, seemingly innocent “cultural object” (to use Wendy Griswold’s² term). Yet, although the same chapter mentions that such in-depth observations require in-depth analyses, the book contains no advice on how such analyses should be conducted. The chapter on “Qualitative Data Analysis” by Sebastiaan Rietjens passes on Miles and Huberman’s advice on line-by-line and axial coding and on displaying qualitative data.³

Several of the *Handbook’s* chapter authors actually refer to Miles and Huberman’s approach, and, truly, if only more students followed this advice, the quality of many qualitative analyses would improve significantly. Nevertheless, what Miles and Huberman offer is not a tool for in-depth analysis, and a *Handbook* chapter on, for example, narrative analysis or semiotics would be exceptionally helpful in order to match the many entries on the collection of in-depth data.

Likewise, while I have already praised the book for not “choosing sides” in the quantitative/qualitative showdown, and while several of the entries mention the prospects of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, I still think the *Handbook* could benefit from a chapter specifically addressing “Multi-Methods Research” (or “Mixed Methods” as it used to be called).

Lastly, although Risa Brook’s chapter on “Scrutinizing the Internet” provides very useful insights on source criticism and Esmaralda Kleinreesink’s chapter on “Ego-Documents” mention blogs alongside with diaries, a 2014 volume should contain more

² Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 2013.

³ Matthew B. Miles & Michael A. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, London, Sage, 1994.

information on web 2.0 sources. In spite of the military's attempt to contain it in the cause of "operational security", the stream of information floating out of the war zone using social media, both by military service members and civilians in the area of operation, is extensive. Yet, few social scientists have any clue about how to approach this brave new world of data. A *Handbook* chapter addressing this issue could make a significant contribution.

Again, the points of critique offered above should be seen in light of the fact that I think the Routledge *Handbook of Research in Military Studies* is a very good book, with many eye-opening entries, and I am happy to have it on my bookshelf. So, while I will still be browsing libraries, bookstores and my colleagues' bookshelves for a more basic textbook on the topic, I have no hesitation in recommending the *Handbook* to other readers with a general interest in military studies.

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