Extended bibliographies on both qualitative and quantitative methods for use in various fields across the social sciences exist, in which the researcher can find in every possible detail which methodology is most appropriate for his or her particular scientific interests and target population; and, of course, how to apply it. Qualitative or quantitative methods, alone or as mixed techniques, have both advantages and downsides and researchers have to decide which path they should follow in order to answer the questions posed. However, most books in that category are content to provide theoretical approaches to research methodologies: few of them recount real experiences, and fewer still discuss issues that are of particular interest in military contexts.

These are precisely the issues addressed in this volume, edited by Helena Carreiras and Celso Castro. Qualitative methods used in the context of military studies are the focus. The aim of the book is not to present the results of specific research projects carried out by the authors, but rather to treat the particularities of conducting research in military institutions and reflect upon the authors’ empirical research experiences. In this wider context, a range of qualitative (as well as mixed) methods and techniques are analyzed (e.g., observation, ethnography, interviewing, and focus groups); the authors come from different disciplinary backgrounds such as anthropology, history, sociology, political science, social psychology, and countries such as Germany, France, Britain, Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa. Furthermore, a variety of topics are discussed, including the observation of the research object, the researcher’s position, the interaction between her/him and those participating in the research while interviewing, observing or talking to others in focus groups, gender-related issues, the “insider”/“stranger” status of the researcher, the process of obtaining data and its analysis, the concept and practice of reflexivity as a way to improve the quality of the research process, and publication of research results.

In the first chapter, Celso Castro discusses the anthropological perspective on studying the military and refers to the fieldwork done over the past two decades in the Brazilian Armed Forces by means of the participant observation method. Castro analyzes the researchers’ experiences, including his own, specifically in relation to the distinction between the “inside, military” and “outside, civil” worlds, a categorization structural to the military worldview (p.9). He then refers to the importance of building trust with the participants in the research process, and thus, of the researcher’s ability to be self-reflective in order to effectively deal with prejudices, understand the distinctive characteristics of the military, and cope with the domination/subordination scheme relation of the researcher with the members of the “military family” (pp.12-15).
In the next chapter, Charles Kirke moves the “insider status” topic further along. Being a service member himself, Kirke describes his own experiences while conducting research on the British Army at the unit level between 1996 and 2002. Kirke explains the various degrees of “insider-ness” and the practical issues involved in the research process for each of them in terms of both advantages and disadvantages. He provides us with paradigms drawn from all the phases of his fieldwork, as well as the stratagems and solutions he came up with in order to make better use of his knowledge as an insider, but also to cope with the respective challenges he encountered.

In the third chapter, Phil C. Langer and Carsten Pietsch discuss methodological and ethical questions of applied contract research for the armed forces and refer to the role of the Bundeswehr Institute of Social Sciences (SOWI) in conducting social science research on the military in Germany. Different perspectives on the research projects (e.g., those that prevail at the ministry and other government agencies, or among outside scholars) pose different demands, and, as a consequence, implications arise. The authors describe the challenges during a research project on intercultural competence that took place in 2010, the importance of reflexivity with regard to the research question, and the strategy pursued. Mixed qualitative and quantitative methods were used in different phases so as to meet the demand of objectivity but also answer important questions that could not be dealt with from a merely quantitative perspective.

Ian Liebenberg shares with the reader his experiences in the use of “auto-ethnography”. He turns into a case-study the writing of his own doctoral thesis on the potential impact of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC) on civilian control of the military in a post-apartheid democracy. He discusses the benefits of his methodology but also the risks it posed to the objectivity of his research findings. The validity of his conclusions could only be ensured through critical reflection, self-reflexivity, double checking of the data, involvement of peer debriefers, extensive planning and effective management during all the phases of the research procedure.

In the fifth chapter, Piero Leirner analyzes relations of control between anthropologists and the military, their effects on ethnographic production, and the differences between ‘military anthropology’ (performed in-house) and ‘anthropology of the military’ that is relevant to military personnel. He sets as his paradigm the results of an ethnography he carried out with the Brazilian Army. Leirner elaborates on the insider/outsider duality and the difficulties he faced in getting access to conduct the research when he had to deal with the chain of command. He also dwells on the quest for valid information from the target population given that the Brazilian Army, like any other military institution, tries to obtain control of practically everything that is written or said about them.

In a similar vein, the problem of getting access to the military when the researcher is not a member of the military is the focus of the sixth chapter. Alejandra Navarro narrates and comments upon her own experience in asking and gaining permission to access two military units of the Argentinian Army in 2008. The difference between obtaining permission to enter the institution and actually obtaining consent to go where the
researcher wants, to talk to the population he/she chooses or to read the material he/she considers important, the relationship between researcher and participant, the need for a strategic plan, and the aspects of anonymity and confidentiality are among the parameters analyzed in this chapter. The implications of the long negotiation process and the role of key informants, potential gatekeepers, and other components of the research design are discussed in great detail following the specific steps that Navarro took in order to manage and complete her fieldwork, but also to debunk the myth that one cannot conduct research within the military institution if the researcher is not a native.

The seventh chapter is focused on the impact of gender (e.g., the researcher’s own, gendered roles and interpretation of the researched, the study’s gender focus) on research relationships, environments and processes in military settings. Helena Carreiras and Ana Alexandre discuss this topic drawing on the study of a Portuguese peacekeeping mission in Kosovo in 2009 and explain how researchers dealt with the gender dimension, the negotiation of their roles, as well as the methods of control they used in order to minimize the gender effect through social reflexivity during the design, preparation, and conduct of field research.

In the following chapter, Janja Vuga and Jelena Juvan raise important questions on the suitability of qualitative methods for the study of the military given the difficulty not only to gain permission to enter the organization and to access a certain unit, but also to gain the trust of service members (who harbour different fears depending on the insider/outside status of the researcher, his/her rank, etc.) during field research. The authors also discuss the factors that can influence the validity of data acquired by using a qualitative approach, the various forms of interviews that can take place, and the issue of whether participants take part in the study on a volunteer basis or under orders. The topic of the triangulation of methods so as to better understand the data and evaluate the findings or a situation from various perspectives is analyzed along with the importance of cross-checking the statements and descriptions gathered. The authors’ argumentation on issues of reliability and validity of qualitative research is further explored by the use of paradigms drawn from the experience of two decades of conducting research within the Slovenian Armed Forces.

The chapter that comes next offers a comparison between France and Germany with regard to the uses of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Based on Delphine Deschaux-Beaume’s Ph.D. dissertation, it resorts to a qualitative methodology to dissect the policy’s genesis, as well as the daily practices and representations of ESDP actors, both officers and diplomats, in the two countries. Issues discussed have to do with military mission confidentiality and its effect on the information gained through access to internal documents and the process of interviewing, the implementation of qualitative method so to ask questions that are meaningful to the interviewees, and the whole issue of reflexivity as regards the position of the researcher relative to the military officers. Information collection and literature review, semi-directed interviews at different levels, and with different agents in the same service (to cover the whole spectrum of the targeted
population), participant observation, content analysis, use of the participants’ mother language, and creation of a relation of mutual trust between the researcher and the interviewees proved fruitful and enabled the author to unearth unreleased data on the subject of her study.

Chapter 10, by Saïd Haddad, reflects on interview techniques used in different research experiences and shows how a variety of factors affect research dynamics and results, such as data reliability, non-verbal elements, the position of the researcher, the legitimacy of the groups, the real purpose of the interview, and the political and social context in which the research takes place. The author bases his chapter on two French surveys: the first, carried out in 2008-2009, was based on collective interviews; the second, conducted in 2006, included individual interviews and a focus group; both focused on the actors directly concerned with the topics studied. Haddad explains that the various interview techniques adopted made a difference in terms of the quality of information gained: they accommodated the different research needs and purposes, but group dynamics, the role of and interactions with the researcher were important factors, irrespective of the specific type of interview used.

In the final chapter, Dirk Kruijt describes how, over three decades, he has been able to conduct non-structured interviews, leading to a conversational intimacy between researcher and interviewee, with the higher echelons of Latin American militaries and guerrilla leadership groups. Using this technique, he managed to gain access to crucial insightful information which throws tell-tale, unconventional light on contemporary history: counter-insurgency operations, peace negotiations, agreements between the military and ‘civilian’ politicians, pre-coup bargaining between economic and political elites and posterior military governments. This trust between the researcher and the interviewee proved to be a rather important element in Kruijt’s case so as to ensure reliability of the information, even though he applied cross-checks through repeats of the interviews by different interviewers about the same details: only when the same information or interpretation was confirmed by several independent sources was the data considered valid.

Taken as a whole, this volume points to the value of diverse methods of qualitative research when conducting fieldwork within the military organization. It provides the reader with interesting information about how to apply qualitative techniques in different research settings and designs. What is of utmost importance is that the authors who contributed to this volume explain in depth the advantages and the disadvantages (notably, the risks incurred in terms of the validity of the research outcome) by giving extensive details based on their own experiences.

The structural and cultural features of military organizations that are shared cross-nationally are emphasized, so that one can understand why certain traits and challenges of qualitative research developed in military contexts are apt to be met by researchers from different national backgrounds. This is especially the case with some of the characteristics of the military profession, such as obedience, interdependency, discipline, hierarchy, and esprit de corps, which need to be taken into consideration when conducting fieldwork.
within a military establishment. The reason behind this is effectively explained in the book. Gaining access to the target population is not enough: in order to successfully complete the research and get valid results, the researcher should build trust between himself/herself and the participants while interacting with them. Various methods can be applied in relation to the status of the researcher (for example, is he/she someone from within or linked in any way to the military, or a complete stranger?).

Last but not least, reflexivity is analyzed at length as a means of managing certain aspects of the research process that could affect the outcome – among others: gender, the researcher’s position, freedom to design the research plan but lack of control over the choice of participant units and personnel, treatment and interpretation of the data collected – not just from a theoretical perspective but also at the applied level. Almost every chapter provides examples from a variety of thoroughly examined real-life research cases.

I believe that the book fills an important bibliographical gap on the subject of field research within the military. Having conducted fieldwork myself for over ten years at the three Hellenic service academies as well as in many units of the Greek Air Force in the area of military ethics, I find that the theoretical and applied issues the authors explore concerning the quality and validity of research, and how this can be ensured, are crucial.

This edited volume should be of particular interest to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as to seasoned researchers in the fields of anthropology, sociology, history, political science, social psychology, applied ethics with regards to the military.

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