

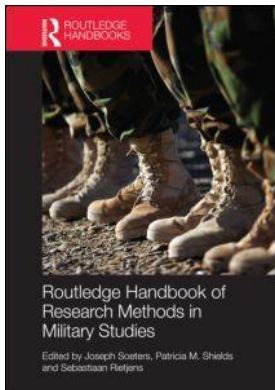
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Researching ‘The Most Dangerous of all Sources’

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14

RESEARCHING ‘THE MOST DANGEROUS OF ALL SOURCES’

Egodocuments

Esmeralda Kleinreesink

S. Hynes (1997) *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*. New York: Penguin.

In *The Soldiers’ Tale*, Samuel Hynes examines English-language journals, memoirs, novels and letters of mainly middle-class men, the literary civilian-soldiers who fought in the two World Wars and in Vietnam. Reviewers often praise the book for its clarity and jargon-free style. It merges autobiography, history and literature to describe and analyse the themes of war: fear, comradeship, courage, cowardice, confusion and the will to survive.

As all egodocument researchers, Hynes faced three methodological challenges – scoping, collecting and analysis. In the prologue of this book, which does not have a separate methodology chapter, Hynes explicitly describes his scoping choices, but leaves solutions to other challenges of collection and analysis implicit.

Hynes begins his scoping process by focusing on understanding what it is like to be ‘there, where the actual killing was done’ (xvi). Therefore, he concentrates on the combatants and excludes the memoirs of generals and other senior officers. Hynes maintains there is no reason to include these officers’ writings because they ‘don’t do the fighting, or live with their troops, or get themselves shot at’ (xv). Hynes focuses on the twentieth century ‘because their wars are still our wars . . . and also because this has been the century of personal narratives of war’ (xiii). He chooses to examine World War I, World War II and Vietnam, because they seem to him crucial points of change in our century’s ‘war story’ (xiv). These three conflicts are the wars ‘that have been most remembered and most recorded’ (xiv).

He does not explain how he collected the books, only that he chose books and reports ‘with a voice that is stubbornly distinct’ (xv), indicating that he dismissed books that were poor reads, thereby delimiting the selection.

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Although he also does not explicitly account for his method of analysis, the method he chooses is clear. *The Soldiers' Tale* is a typical qualitative study in that extensive quotes from the books researched support the main argument. The work is multidisciplinary, using theories to support his arguments from fields ranging from psychology and sociology to history.

He concludes with a paradox: the war egodocuments are true, but not historically truthful; they are neither travel writing nor autobiography, nor history (16). War is an almost alien, indescribable experience, and what the egodocument describes is not usually what happened, because memoirs are 'filtered reality, what memory preserves' (23).

Hynes shows that each war generates its own stories and myths. In the First World War, the notion of a romantic war in which the British soldier could become a hero disappeared in the trenches, although it remained in the air war where aces were still heroes. World War I is a war of disillusionment. '[A] generation of innocent young men . . . went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences' (101).

However, that did not stop the young men in the Second World War from enthusiastically enlisting. Hynes concludes that the seduction of war lures each new generation. 'Every generation, it seems, must learn its own lessons from its own war, because every war is different and is fought by different ignorant young men' (111). Significantly, this was a new war, with another myth, that of the Good War. The men remained frustrated by the ways in which it was fought, 'but they did not regret their service' (173).

The next large war, Vietnam, was not a Good War, but a Bad War. The US fought the war 'for political reasons, and wrong ones' (178). It was to the US what World War I was to Britain: 'a war of national disillusionment that changed the way a generation thought about its country, its leaders and war itself' (179).

In the epilogue, Hynes concludes that storytelling is a primal need. It helps to order a disordered experience and thereby give it meaning, and for the listener to give a human face and voice to war.

Although the results presented in this seminal study are interesting and convincing, the study suffers from a lack of methodological foundations and methodological guidance, problems common to qualitative studies.

Sometimes it is hard to study the military. In her article 'Studying the Military Comparatively', Deschaux-Baume concludes that the military is a fairly inaccessible social field for outsiders. The military limits access to internal documents, senior officers may have internalised censorship and participant observation is 'far from being welcome and facilitated' (Deschaux-Baume 2013: 138). However, there is a rich source of data on the military available to any researcher: military egodocuments.

This chapter delves more deeply into military egodocuments to discover what they have to offer the military researcher and what kind of challenges they bring. It starts by looking at what egodocuments are, then it focuses on their advantages and drawbacks and how they can be studied. The chapter concludes with the three main challenges that studying egodocuments brings: scoping, collecting and analysis.

Egodocuments

The term ‘egodocument’ refers to ‘a text in which an author writes about his or her own acts, thoughts and feelings’ (Dekker 2002: 14). Until the middle of the twentieth century, egodocuments as source were regarded by historians as ‘extremely unreliable’ and ‘simply useless’ (Dekker 2002: 21). Dutch historian Romein even dubbed them ‘the most dangerous of all sources’ (Romein in Dekker 2002: 19).

However, with a changing, postmodern orientation, research emphasis has shifted to the social construction of facts instead of the facts themselves. French autobiography researcher Lejeune stresses that autobiographies should not be seen as sources of historical information, but ‘rather as primary social *facts* in their own right’ (Lejeune 1989: xx). Based on memory research, Krassnitzer concludes that it is not a personal truth that can be read in autobiographies, but an experience of how social collectives (‘Erinnerungskollektive’) interpret and remember events (Krassnitzer 2006: 214). This is what makes egodocument research so interesting. These works are not just personal stories, but manifestations of (military) culture.

Egodocuments are broadly divided into three categories based on the intended public (Epkenhans et al. 2006: xiii) (see Figure 14.1).

First, egodocuments are written for personal use. For example, writers use diaries to order and reconstruct thought, feelings and memories (Baggerman 2010: 65). These private documents are usually not intended for wider distribution. For this reason, diaries can be purchased with a lock on the cover to protect them from being read by others. Second, egodocuments can be produced for a limited distribution. Traditionally, military personnel communicated with the home front using letters. These days they do the same using emails. These email exchanges are egodocuments intended for one or more persons to read, but are not expected to be widely distributed outside the limited circle of friends and family. Finally egodocuments may be written for the public. Internet blogs and books are examples of egodocuments aimed at a broad public.

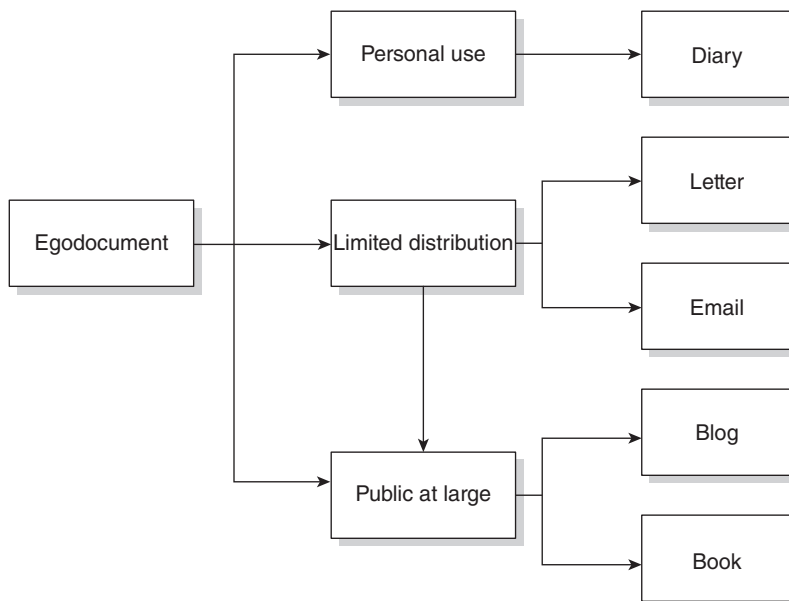


Figure 14.1 Examples of egodocuments

The kind of egodocument does not dictate its eventual audience. Some diaries were kept with the purpose of being published in book form, such as the Anne Frank diary (Frank 2007; 1952) and Internet blogs can be screened so that only invited people can see the content of the blogs, thereby making them of limited distribution.

Hynes, the author of this chapter's illustrative study, *The Soldiers' Tale*, uses different kinds of egodocuments for his research. The majority of the personal narratives he uses are memoirs. Still, he also includes journals, diaries and letters (Hynes 1997: xiv).

Why study egodocuments?

Egodocuments are such rich data sources that their content is applicable to military researchers of every conceivable background. A medical researcher uses military egodocuments to study post-traumatic stress disorder and smoking in military personnel (Robinson 2012), a sociologist uses them to study military strategy (King 2010), and a historian reads egodocuments to look at changing ideas about the relationship between body and mind (Harari 2008).

Aside from their rich content, egodocuments are attractive to all sorts of military researchers, from all sorts of methodological backgrounds. According to H. Russell Bernard, '[p]ositivists can tag text and can study regularities across the tags . . . interpretivists can study meaning' (Bernard 1996: 9). Working with unobtrusive methods, or what Bernard calls 'found texts' such as egodocuments, eliminates researcher influence on the text compared to 'created texts' such as interviews.

That brings us to one of the disadvantages of studying egodocuments. Because there is no direct contact between the author of the text and the researcher, a detailed probing of the narrative is impossible (Woodward 2008: 380). Of course, content analysis could be complemented by other research methods such as interviews, but getting in touch with book authors and publishing houses is often challenging. In my study of Afghanistan memoirs published between 2001 and 2010 (Kleinreesink 2014), I found that many soldier-authors failed to disclose their age in their books. After repeated contact attempts, a substantial portion of them did not respond to my enquiry. Unfortunately the age variable in my data base was missing a value in 17 per cent of the cases.

Another drawback, which was mentioned earlier, is the uncertain historical truth of egodocuments. As Hynes notes, '[a]s history they are unsatisfactory: restricted, biased, afflicted by emotion, and full of errors' (Hynes 1997: 15). Bias and emotion are not the only psychological reasons that affect the content of egodocuments. In the *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Fussell concludes that in letters and postcards home World War I soldiers wrote only about socially desirable subjects in an effort to spare the recipient's feelings (Fussell 1975: 182).

Social desirability is not the only cause of this self-censorship. Self-censorship also results from an organisational constraint that in Western countries is specific to the military: official censorship. In order to preserve operational security, some egodocuments are checked by the military before distribution. In both World Wars the military routinely censored letters written by its personnel to the home front (Fussell 1975: 182). Although currently letters home or blogs are no longer actively censored, they are bound by operational security rules. As a result, the military still check books written by military personnel before publication for security breaches.

A final drawback to mention is that the representativeness of these authors is unclear. Can they be considered a proxy of the average soldier, or are military authors a separate breed? As most studies into military egodocuments only look at specific groups (Vernon 2005: 3) using them to draw conclusions about the military in general is tricky at best.

What to study in egodocuments?

Having discussed the advantages and disadvantages of studying egodocuments in general, let's now look at three main text elements of egodocuments (see Figure 14.2). There are paratext, text, and the words that make up the text.

The first element to be considered for study is paratext. The term 'paratext' (Genette 1997) refers to all those elements that surround a text. These elements include book covers, forewords and acknowledgments in the narrow sense to book reviews and interviews with the author in the broader sense. Paratext is most useful for studying the relationship between authors and their publics. For example, in the preface of a memoir the author makes the motivation for writing it explicit, and the book cover establishes what kind of audience is sought. Book reviews, or the absence of reviews, give an indication of the book's impact.

Images present a special case of paratext. Military egodocuments (memoirs, blogs or emails) are often accompanied by photographs. Ninety-four per cent of contemporary Afghanistan memoirs have photographs or other images such as maps. On average, 25 pages (10 per cent) of the books comprise images (Kleinreesink 2014). However, so far, hardly any research has been conducted into military images. Most of this research deals with images *of* the military (e.g. Griffin 2010) whereas it would be equally interesting to look at images *by* the military: images they find important to show others or to remember.

Second, characteristics of the 'text' like its main themes or the plot are subjects of investigation. Classical military egodocument studies such as Hynes' *The Soldiers' Tale*, and Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* delve more deeply into common, often universal, themes that military authors write about, such as fear, comradeship, honour and disillusionment. These universal military themes are good and recognisable starting points for comparative studies between, for instance, countries or time periods.

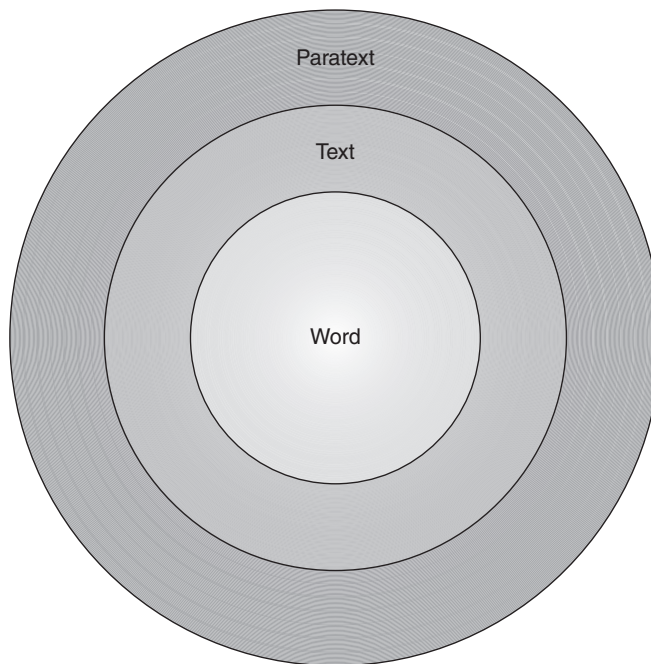


Figure 14.2 Three text elements

Plot is another global text element. Most Western stories are told and written in the form of an Aristotelian plot. This means a narrative in which the hero of the story makes a journey. During this journey, which has a limited time frame, he overcomes obstacles, and in the process possibly changes the world and himself (Aristotle 2004: VII 51a6). There are many theories that can be used to study plot structure. These theories range from plotting the positive or negative value of the story in time (Gergen and Gergen 1988), to Friedman's highly structured and detailed, but easy to use 14 basic plot types (Friedman 1955).

Third, at a deeper level, the words that make up the text can also be studied. With the advent of digital documents and improved optical character recognition software, it has become possible to study texts on the level of words. Qualitative data analysis software, such as ATLAS.ti and NVivo, have standard word frequency query options available, which can be used to identify important themes or concepts. Specialised word counting software exists (LIWC, which stands for Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) that makes it possible to study emotional, cognitive, and structural word usage in texts from a psychological point of view (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999).

Three challenges

Now that it is clear what egodocuments are and what can be studied in them, it is time to delve more deeply into the characteristic challenges that come with studying egodocuments. Three challenges will be explored: scoping, collecting and analysis.

Challenge 1: Scoping

The first challenge is how to do scoping. This refers to defining what is and what is not part of the study. Scoping will be particularly challenging for the egodocument researcher as a plethora of material is available. The first choice to make is the time period researched. Should the researcher look at historical egodocuments or contemporary ones? This chapter's illustrative author, Hynes, chose egodocuments from three different wars for his research: both World Wars and Vietnam and explicitly excluded Korea because it 'came and went without glory, and left no mark on American imaginations' (Hynes 1997: xiii).

A second aspect of time is the timing of the egodocuments themselves. Three distinct types of narratives can be distinguished when looking at the time factor (see Figure 14.3).

The first are those narratives that are written on the spot while the writer is still in theatre. Examples include diaries, emails and blogs. Memoirs can also be written while the war is still going on, or immediately after a war, which Hynes calls immediate memoirs (Hynes 1997: 4). Finally, there are retrospective memoirs (Hynes 1997: 4), memoirs written long after the war ends. Each type has its advantages and disadvantages. Some are easier to collect (see challenge two). Some are easier to read. A retrospective memoir is generally of another quality than a blog written on the spot. A handwritten diary found in an archive is not as comfortable a read as a diary that has been reworked into a book published by a regular publisher. Hynes specifically selected documents that were a good read, and he is not the only one as 'most critics instinctively gravitate to the study of literary masterworks' (Eakin 1989: xx).

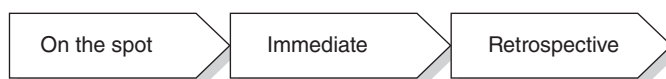


Figure 14.3 Three types of narratives

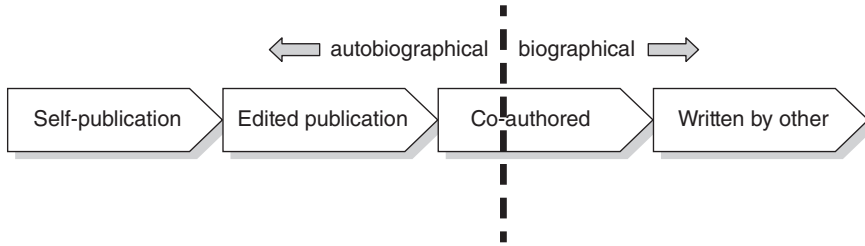


Figure 14.4 Autobiographical continuum

The next choice is whether to study all egodocuments available, or only look at texts from authors with a certain background. A common limitation is to include only narratives by those who have fought, which is what Hynes does. For contemporary pieces, this would be extremely limiting due to the current tooth-to-tail ratio of the military. While at one time front-line combatants made up the majority of personnel, in current militaries supporters comprise the majority of the organisation (Vernon 2005: 3). Another common limitation in research is looking at specific minority groups, such as African Americans, or women, to such an extent that Vernon points out that ‘personal narratives by male noncombatant military persons – white males especially – are easily the most neglected of all military life writings in Anglo American criticism’ (Vernon 2005: 3).

Another often-used scoping mechanism is choosing country or language specific texts, as multi-language research is quite rare. Hynes for example limits his research to combatants who write in English both from Great Britain and the US. These kinds of scoping decisions have to do with the researcher’s language skills and preferences, which are always a good starting point for any research.

If books are the preferred medium, one of the classical dilemmas (Lejeune 1989: 3) the researcher has to deal with is where the autobiography ends and the biography starts. Books are seldom only written by the author himself or herself, instead there is an (auto)biographical continuum ranging from entirely self-written to written by others (see Figure 14.4).

Self-publishers (publishing companies that publish books at the risk and cost of the author) generally contribute little to nothing to the content of the book. At most they edit the manuscript for mistakes after payment by the author. Regular publishers (who publish books at their own risk and cost), in contrast, have an editing process that normally includes changes in style and content. Further, regular publishers often have general content requirements for their writers which take into account their target audience. Sometimes regular publishers even offer an inexperienced author a co-author, which is generally an experienced writer or journalist. This is where the change from autobiography into a biography happens. As the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* puts it, ‘the most perplexing texts in terms of authenticity are collaborative autobiographies, because of their virtually oxymoronic nature . . . collaborative autobiography disrupts the single identity of author cum narrator cum subject that is the constituting feature of the genre’ (Couser 2001: 72). A co-author who thoroughly adapts the texts of the original author might still be seen as producing an autobiography, a co-author who interviews the original author and does the writing herself, produces in effect a biography.

Challenge 2: Collecting the documents

When the research scope has been established, the documents that fall under this scope have to be collected, and that can be difficult and time consuming. The kind of document dictates, to a

certain extent, the collection method. In the next section, five different types of egodocuments (emails, letters, diaries, blogs and books) are discussed, including the form in which they could be collected.

The first three document types, emails, letters and diaries, are mainly intended for personal use and limited distribution. That means that in order to get hold of these documents, the researcher often has to ask people to share them. Researchers can use their own network of military personnel to contact authors of these egodocuments. That existing network can then be extended by snowballing. In snowballing, the researcher asks person A to provide introductions to two or more people who might also be willing to share their egodocuments. Another way of getting in touch with former military personnel is by placing advertisements asking for egodocuments in military media such as veterans' magazines and military blogs. Advertising can be inexpensive, because many military magazines offer announcement opportunities for free.

For those researchers interested in historical letters or diaries, there is also a third option: the archives. In many European countries, egodocument cataloguing projects have been set up that identify egodocuments available in public archives, libraries and museums. These projects are often followed by publication series in which the most interesting texts are published. For an overview of these projects, see Dekker (2002: 28–30). Military personnel are excellent contributors to public archives. The Dutch project revealed that between 1500 and 1900 the most prolific authors of archived egodocuments were clergymen and military personnel (Blaak in Baggerman 2010: 68–69).

For limited access Internet egodocuments, the same personal approach to getting access to the sites may be necessary as for emails, letters and diaries. However, since many blogs and websites exist in the public domain, finding these may be easier. Holding on to them is more difficult, though. They disappear quickly, so in order to work with them, an appropriate archival strategy has to be chosen. Possible strategies vary from printing them out to using specialised web archiving software.

The disadvantage for the four types of documents mentioned above is that they are always part of a sample of the total number of documents available, but that the size of the total is unknown, and therefore the sampling bias is unknown. Books, however, offer the opportunity to capture the entire population because they are less numerous if rightly scoped, and because their existence is documented in various ways. Woodward and Jenkins, for example, study all 150+ British military memoirs from 1980 to present (Woodward and Jenkins 2012: 351), my own research deals with all 54 Afghanistan memoirs published between 2001 and 2010 in the US, the UK, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. Even though theoretically it is possible to collect all of them, it takes much time and effort.

Several techniques can be used to reach saturation. A classical starting point for finding books is the library. Specialised national military libraries are most helpful in this, as these libraries often have the most extensive collections of military books. Internet book sites make snowball sampling possible. Starting with one relevant book, these sites offer suggestions for similar books ('Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought . . .'), which can lead to similar books, and so on. All in all, this quickly leads to a good overview of available books in the Internet site's geographical market. And, finally, memoir researchers also browse (secondhand) bookshops to find books.

For example, in order to find all Afghanistan memoirs published between 2001 and 2010 for my research, I started by looking in military library catalogues. Next, I solicited reading lists from military historical societies. In addition I employed Internet lists on military memoirs, such as the almost 300 Listmania! lists from Amazon.com that come up when searching on the word

combination Afghanistan + war, and browsed book review pages of veterans' magazines. All the books that showed up in these searches were then fed into the main book websites of the countries researched, such as Amazon.co.uk for the UK and Bol.com for the Netherlands, to start the snowballing process. This process took place over several months, but left me feeling that the chances of having missed a book were very low.

Depending on the research method chosen (see challenge three below) it might be interesting to look at the digital availability of the texts. The advantage of working with blogs and websites is that they are by nature digitally available. Books also exist in digital form, but my experience is that acquiring a digital copy in a format that can be used in analysis software can be difficult. Not all publishers, especially not the larger ones, will provide a digital copy for research. And digitalizing them yourself, by scanning them on a copying machine with OCR (object character recognition) is tedious. Commercially available OCR techniques still require manual text correction.

Challenge 3: Analysis

As discussed in the section 'Why study egodocuments?' working with texts is extremely versatile, and makes it possible to do all different types of research. Therefore, one of the challenges it brings is the choice of research method. The first choice is whether the research will be multi-disciplinary or not. Hynes is a literature professor, but his book combines literature, psychology, sociology and history with apparent ease.

The second choice is whether to use qualitative or quantitative analysis. The traditional approach for studying texts is the qualitative approach that Hynes chose. He looks at the main themes that come up while reading and analysing the egodocuments and substantiates his findings with fitting quotes from the texts. Exactly what analytic method he uses remains unclear, but there are several possible methods. Next, three often-used techniques are discussed: the historical method, grounded theory and content analysis.

The historical method mainly takes place in the mind of the historian/scientist. Carr, quoting writer L. Paul, describes it in this book *What Is History?* as 'rummaging in the ragbag of observed "facts", selects, pieces and patterns the *relevant* observed facts together, rejecting the *irrelevant*, until it has sewn together a logical and rational quilt of "knowledge"' (Carr 1975: 104). This loosely describes Hynes' method.

In the sixties, Strauss and Glaser devised a general methodology called *grounded theory* 'for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed' (Strauss and Corbin 1994: 273). It substantiated the rummaging-the-ragbag-method with an inductive process, whereby the researcher continues to switch between data collection and analysis, helped by coding techniques. Currently, grounded theory may be the most common qualitative research method used by researchers (Morse 2009: 13).

Also, scholars developed other approaches for qualitative data analysis. Miles and Huberman have collected all sorts of techniques for qualitative analysis in their source book (Miles and Huberman 1994), as did Krippendorff for an approach aimed at analysing text in the context of its use called *content analysis* (Krippendorff 2004). What they all share is that formal coding techniques aid the analysis. In this process the researcher assigns codes to parts of the text that are deemed interesting. Computer-aided qualitative data analysis software programs (CAQDAS) have been developed that support these practices, such as ATLAS.ti and NVivo. These programs do not analyse the data themselves, but support the researcher during the analysis phase.

I used grounded theory in my research when analysing writing motives. Instead of starting with a preconceived theory on writing motivation, I started by writing down every relevant

quotation from each book analysed. These quotations were then fed into ATLAS.ti and given a code that I made up on the fly, a process called open coding. This resulted in almost 60 different codes. These codes were then clustered and related to each other by theoretical coding (Strauss and Corbin 1994: 277). This procedure resulted in five main categories and a theory that explains why soldier-authors say they write books.

Studying egodocuments does not have to stop at qualitative methods, however, concludes H. Russell Bernard in his article *Qualitative Data, Quantitative Analysis*, because '[c]oding turns qualitative data (texts) into quantitative data (codes)' (Bernard 1996: 10). The coding makes it possible to search for patterns. CAQDAS programs usually offer the possibility to export the results into SPSS format, thereby providing the opportunity to perform statistical analyses on the data. I used this option to note whether a specific book/author did or did not mention specific writing motives. The coding of motives was done in ATLAS.ti but the resulting dichotomous results (the book mentions this motive: yes/no) were exported into SPSS.

It is also possible to code variables directly into SPSS, as I did in my Afghanistan research to answer questions related to the authors and their plots. I considered each book a separate case (a row in SPSS) for which variables (columns in SPSS) were noted down. Coding the books was done by indicating the variables in SPSS such as nationality, age, whether the author is a reservist or a professional, or whether it was published by a traditional publisher or via self-publishing. Combining these results (and the dichotomous writing motives that were imported from ATLAS.ti) by means of, for instance, a crosstabs analysis, or a t-test shows whether the combination is statistically significantly different. In this way, the research shows for example that independent of country, a professional soldier is almost eight times more likely to get published by a traditional publisher than a reservist.

When there are only a small number of egodocuments in the research, however, only a limited range of statistical analyses is possible. In these cases, Ragin's Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), a method of Boolean analysis can be used to look for patterns (Ragin 2008). Several freeware programs are available to support QCA, such as Ragin's own *fs/QCA*.

Some researchers, such as Scott et al. in their study of post-deployment stress and growth of US soldiers, do not choose between qualitative and quantitative method. Instead, they consciously use a mixed methods approach combining the two methodologies 'to achieve a product that is more than the sum of its parts' (Scott et al. 2011: 275). So even in the choice of method, egodocuments offer a wide range of possibilities.

Conclusion

Egodocuments present an incredibly rich source of data with great research opportunities for any researcher, regardless of their discipline or methodological background. Given the density of the information contained in these works, it is surprising that military researchers do not use it more often. Egodocuments are an important source for studies that aim to understand the person behind the soldier. These documents provide deep insight into the people who write them, the culture they live and work in, and the discourses in which they take part. These insights go much deeper than surveys or interviews can provide. Norwegian autobiography researcher Marianne Gullestad even concludes to her surprise that '[m]any of the written texts offer the reader a rapport and an intimacy of a kind that an anthropological fieldworker develops only after a long period of time with a few people' (Gullestad 1996: 36). Studying auto-narratives is a great way to gain more insights into operations and the well-being of the people who carry them out. They also offer an attractive and easy starting place for researchers interested in doing cross-cultural research. And as military researcher Abel Esterhuysen concludes in his historiographical overview

on the South African counterinsurgency, sometimes egodocuments are the only available source (Esterhuysen 2012: 355).

In short, egodocument research is definitely worth considering for any military researcher.

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