European Journal of International Security (2026), **11**, 518–540
doi:10.1017/eis.2025.10024

EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Positionality, power, and reciprocity: Rethinking reflexive methodology in terrorism research

Joshua Akintayo

School of Economics, Politics, and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK
Email: akintayojosh@gmail.com

(Received 7 February 2025; revised 26 August 2025; accepted 5 September 2025)

In reflexive methodology in terrorism studies and international security broadly, there are arguments about the absence of African voices, the lack thereof contributing to standardizing the fieldwork experiences of Western terrorism scholars as 'one-size-fits-all'. However, while the voices of African-based scholars, particularly those based in the West, are increasingly being reflected in reflexive methodology in international security, we know little about how shared national belongingness and its associated cultural norms between the researcher and the researched influence the process of elite interviewing. This article addresses these limitations by reflecting on my experiences as a Nigerian conducting elite interviews with fellow nationals who are counter-terrorism security elites (CTSE) in Nigeria. In doing so, I examine the concepts of seniority, hierarchy, and reciprocity – important social norms that, while present in many contexts, take on distinctive meanings within counter-terrorism institutions in Nigeria – on data access and knowledge production. I contend that the shared cultural understanding between the researcher and CTSE study participants leads them to deploy these norms to foster post-fieldwork relational positionalities, which are used to advance their personal or career interests. This situation results in specific methodological and ethical dilemmas, which are addressed by engaging with and integrating these norms to resolve them. This article contributes to reflexive methodology in terrorism by nuancing the debate on situational ethics management in fieldwork dilemmas and advocating for context-based positionality.

Keywords: elite interviewing; Nigeria; positionality; reflexive methodology; terrorism studies

Introduction

Amidst an emerging 'reflexive turn' in terrorism studies,[1] questions have been raised about the need for introspection around various issues such as the process of data collection and knowledge production, positionality, and power dynamics in terrorism research.[2] Furthermore, these debates

[1]Rodermond, E and Weerman. F, 'The Strengths and Struggles of Different Methods of Research on Radicalization, Extremism, and Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024), pp. 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2361947: *Geelhoed*, F, Busher, J, Massé, L and De Pelecijn. L, 'In the Discomfort Zone: Emotional Labour and Reflexivity in Field Research on Extremism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024), pp. 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2361954; Esholdt, F, Henriette, and Jørgensen. K, 'Emotional Trials in Terrorism Research: Running Risks When Accessing Salafi-Jihadist Foreign Fighter Returnees and Their Social Milieu', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* 47:4 (2021), pp. 432–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1962500; Gelashvili, Audrey and Gagnon, Audrey. 'One of the Boys: On Researching the Far Right as a Woman', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024), pp. 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2361953; Ahmed Ajil, 'Studying Terror Through My I's'., *Perspectives on Terrorism,* 17:2 (2023), pp. 74–91, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27255593; Schmidt, Rachel, 'When Fieldwork Ends: Navigating Ongoing Contact with Former Insurgents', *Terrorism and Political Violence,* 33:2 (2021), pp. 312–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880228.

[2]Rodermond and Weerman, 'The Strengths and Struggles'; Schmidt, 'When Fieldwork Ends', p. 312.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The British International Studies Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and discussions are also shaped around the ethical and methodological dynamics that characterize fieldwork practices.[3] In other words, reflexively unpacking the layers of complexity into core components such as power and gendered subtleties, researcher-researched dynamics, and the role of emotions has been argued to substantiate the analytical precision of terrorism research.[4] As Geelhoed et al. posit, 'we should openly acknowledge and discuss our positionality and the personal impact of conducting fieldwork in extremism and terrorism studies. The ambiguity, discomfort, and doubt that this kind of research brings forward is, in our view, not something to hide, but to openly embrace'.[5] This is because, according to Hoffman, the field of terrorism studies is characterized by the bifurcation between scholars and their subject of enquiry.[6] Additionally, Schmidt, also contends that 'researchers often do not speak openly about the ethical dilemmas they face – both during and after fieldwork – fearing it might damage their credibility'.[7] However, notwithstanding this call for reflexive accounts in terrorism studies, the debate on reflexive methodology in the field still remains 'rare'.[8] Consequently, enquiries on positionality, power dynamics, ethical interactions with research participants, and their influence on knowledge production in (counter-)terrorism remain inadequately addressed.

While the reflexive discourses of African-based researchers on their experiences conducting (counter-)terrorism research are few and far between, African scholars are increasingly sharing their field experiences on (counter-)terrorism.[9] Although, many of these researchers are often based in Western institutions and have been described as diaspora researchers, academic homecomers or Thirdworlders.[10] These categories of scholars are in-between, that is, there are neither insiders nor outsiders.[11] While these African-based researchers are making significant contributions on the reflexive methodology within the field of security, and terrorism studies more specifically, there exist critical gaps. First, the emerging scholarship on the reflexive-turn in terrorism studies remains silent in capturing the nuanced experiences of scholars from the African context. Thus, we lack a granular perspective on the distinctively peculiar positional dynamics shaping terrorism research, including the influence of shared socio-norms on the researcher-researched relations, data access and knowledge production. Second, while scholars in terrorism studies argue that interviews provide a way to bridge the 'chasm' that separate scholars and their subjects of enquiry,[12] and thus argue for more methodological openness in the field, with regard to conducting interviews,[13] there still remains little scholarly accounts on empirical possibilities and limitations involved in fieldwork, especially with state (counter)terrorism actors.

[3]Geelhoed et al., 'In the Discomfort Zone', p. 22; Gelashvili and Gagnon, 'One of the Boys', p. 22; Schmidt, 'When Fieldwork Ends', p. 320; Mills, T., Massoumi, N., & Miller, D., 'The ethics of researching "terrorism" and political violence: a sociological approach', *Contemporary Social Science* (2020) 15(2), pp. 119–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2019.1660399.

[4]Geelhoed et al., 'In the Discomfort Zone', p. 22; Gelashvili and Gagnon. 'One of the Boys', p. 10.

[5]Geelhoed et al. 'In the Discomfort Zone', p. 22.

[6]Bruce Hoffman, 'Current Research on Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* 15 (1992), p. 28.

[7]Schmidt, 'When Fieldwork Ends', p. 315.

[8]Allam, Hannah. '"It Gets To You'. Extremism Researchers Confront The Unseen Toll Of Their Work", NPR, 20 September 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/09/20/762430305/it-gets-to-you-extremism-researchers-confront-the-unseentoll-of-their-work; Cohn, Carol, "'Feminist Security Studies': Toward a Reflexive Practice", *Politics & Gender,* 7:4 (2011): pp. 581–86, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X11000389.

[9]Njoku, Emeka Thaddues, Joshua Akintayo, and Idris Mohammed. 'Positionality and knowledge production on conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys in (counter-) terrorism', *International Studies Perspectives (*2025), pp. 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekae024.

[10]Adebayo, Kudus Oluwatoyin, and Emeka T. Njoku, 'Local and transnational identity, positionality and knowledge production in Africa and the African diaspora', *Field Methods,* 35:1 (2023), pp. 18–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X211051574.

[11]McFarlane-Morris, 'Shenika, Home Sweet Home?' Struggles of Intracultural 'Betweenness' of Doctoral Fieldwork in My Home Country of Jamaica, *AREA*, 52:2 (2020), pp. 394–400, https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12580.

[12]Bruce Hoffman, 'Current Research on Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict', p. 28.

[13]John Horgan, 'Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression,* 4:3 (2012), pp. 195–211, https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2011.594620.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The article addresses these knowledge gaps. In doing so, I explored the influence of the socio-cultural norms of seniority, reciprocity, and hierarchy, when studying (counter)terrorism elites engaged in developing and implementing counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) policies in Nigeria. The article argues that shared national belongingness between researcher and researched often leads both the researcher and the researched to deploy the socio-norms of seniority and familiarity strategically to advance personal and career interests. In particular, on the one hand, the symbolic deployment of the norm of hierarchy by counter-terrorism security elites (CTSE) leverages the researcher's imperative to access 'inaccessible primary' (counter-)terrorism data. This norm, which CTSE deploy to show seniority, is also strategically used by elites to invoke reciprocity, and redefine researcher-researched strategically, such as pursuing professional growth, seeking academic mentorship, or simply improving their career proficiency. In other words, relational positionalities emerge in researcher-researched relations and interact with the socio-cultural norm of reciprocity and a sense of mutual expectation.

Beyond unpacking the lived realities of an African terrorism researcher on (counter)terrorism elite interviewing, this article expands the 'situational ethics' concept as theorized by Geelhoed et al. and Greenwood.[14] Situational ethics abound in empirical fieldwork on terrorism research (and they are almost inevitable dilemmas that researchers have to contend with while undergoing fieldwork). To this end, Geelhoed et al. argued that researchers are saddled with negotiating these dilemmas by improvising ethically sensible measures.[15] In line with the above concept, this article argues that improvising strategies for navigating ethical dilemmas in field research on terrorism goes beyond what is within the purview of the researcher alone and can rather be co-constitutive by researchers, researcher participants and shared understanding of inherent socio-cultural norms of research context by both researcher and research participants. In this article, the norm of reciprocity became a valuable reflexive tool in managing the situation wherein 'interviewees gained a false impression that agreeing to an interview would somehow lead to direct improvement of their personal situation',[16] thus making reciprocity a reflexive value of discomfort.

Secondly, this article deepens our understanding of the empirical possibilities and limitations involved in terrorism fieldwork especially with regard to what Hoffman regards as the role of interviews in bridging the 'chasm' that characterizes the field of terrorism studies, In doing so, it provides rich insights into the contextually situated ways to navigate the obstacles associated with interviewing with state (counter)terrorism actors in contexts terrorism data is closely guarded, and where the security culture interprets research as spying. Imperatively, it underscores the role of context-based positionality, navigating barriers entrenched in the interviewing state (counter)terrorism actors. As a result, the article also contributes to a better methodological understanding of conducting first-hand empirical research into the PCVE discursive practices of African states.

Reflexive methodology discourses in terrorism studies

Emerging literature on reflexivity in terrorism has emphasized challenges of access, ethics, and rapport.[17] These insights build on wider anthropological debates on power and representation,[18]

[14]Geelhoed et al., 'In the Discomfort Zone'; Greenwood, Maja Touzari, 'Becoming a Foreign Fighter: The Ethics and Agency of Fighting Jihad' (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2018, Policycommons.net).

[15]Geelhoed et al. 'In the Discomfort Zone', p. 15.

[16]Dolnik Adam, 'Conducting Field Research on Terrorism: A Brief Primer', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 7:2 (2011), pp. 3–35, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26298510.

[17]Schmidt, 'When Fieldwork Ends'; Geelhoed et al. 'In the Discomfort Zone'.

[18]Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (University of California Press, 2010); Faye Venetia Harrison, *Outsider Within: Reworking Anthropology in the Global Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as well as issues on how researcher identity and relational interviewing shape access and trust.[19] Similarly, studies on elite interviewing in security institutions highlight the distinct challenges of navigating secrecy and hierarchy in such settings.[20] Building on these works, this article advances the conversation on security sector ethnography by focusing specifically on fieldwork challenges, methodological and ethical issues entailed in studying Nigerian counter-terrorism security elites (CTSE), showing how norms of hierarchy, seniority and reciprocity shape relational positionalities and knowledge production.

Within terrorism studies, the discourse of reflexivity is emerging as a way to capture more analytically and systematically the varying layers of influences – ethical, positional, and methodological bias that affect the process of knowledge production in the field.[21] These strictures, spanning an extended period of time, shape the academic study of terrorism,[22] and have recently been aptly described by Bart Schuurman as 'enduring issues in the study of terrorism'.[23] Prominent amongst these are conceptual and methodological problems; the latter's continued existence has been highlighted as detrimental to the advancement of the field.[24] A curious observation of the field helps substantiate this perspective more clearly. While few discussions exist on some practical, ethical, and methodological considerations, such as how to gain access to hard-to-reach populations and effective interviewing strategies,[25] there is comparable less honest and frank discussions about the researcher's experiences manoeuvring myriads of ethical and methodological struggles and challenges encountered in the process of data gathering in the field, and the practical strategies adopted in overcoming them. Literature posits that this could be due to a number of factors. For one, there is the argument that this silence emanates from researchers' fear that speaking openly about their experiences and challenges hampers their credibility and that of their research.[26] For Geelhoed et al., the politically charged nature of terrorism and the varying complex emotions that it evokes, and how this could shape the acceptance of analysis, could sometimes constrain researchers from reflecting on their multidimensional field experiences. Specifically, they highlight how sharing experiences of interviewing and conducting long-term fieldwork in a range of radical or extremist milieus could raise issues of subjectivity, complicity, and the quality of research produced broadly.[27]

Therefore, scholars have begun advocating for more open, detailed, and explicit reflections on a wide range of ethical and methodological encumbrances and vagaries of positionalities

[19]Fubara, M. Notes from the Field: Reconciling Changing Positionalities: Reflection from My Fieldwork in Nigeria. *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research Newsletter*, 211 (2023), 2022; Fujii, L. A., *Interviewing in social science research: A relational approach* (Routledge: 2018).

[20]Wright, Hannah, 'Critical Ethnography in National Security Institutions: Methodological and Ethical Reflections', *PS: Political Science & Politics,* 56:1 (2023), pp. 94–98, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522000762; Damien Van Puyvelde, 'Qualitative research interviews and the study of national security intelligence', *International Studies Perspectives,* 19:4 (2018), pp. 375–91, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky001; Erin Damman, and Day Christopher, 'Charming the Generals: The Study of Africa's Security Elites', *Conflict, Security & Development,* 24:6 (2024), pp. 701–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2427213.

[21]Rodermond and Weerman 'The Strengths and Struggles'; Geelhoed et al. 'In the Discomfort Zone'.

[22]Marc Sageman, 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research', *Terrorism and Political Violence,* 26:4 (2014), pp. 565–580, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895649.

[23]Bart Schuurman, 'Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32:5 (2018), pp. 1011–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023.

[24]Schuurman, 'Research on Terrorism'.

[25]Marco Nilsson, 'Interviewing Jihadists: On the Importance of Drinking Tea and Other Methodological Considerations', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 41, 6 (2018), pp. 419–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1325649; Dolnik, 'Conducting Field Research', 72; Lindsay Clutterbuck and Richard Warnes, 'Interviewing Government and Official Sources-An Introductory Guide', in *Conducting Terrorism Field Research: A Guide,* ed. Adam Dolnik (*Routledge,* 2013), 11; Horgan, 'Interviewing the Terrorists'; Anne Speckhard, 'Research Challenges Involved in Field Research and Interviews Regarding the Militant Jihad, Extremism, and Suicide Terrorism', *Democracy and Security,* 5:3 (2009), pp. 199–222, https://doi.org/10.1080/17419160903183409.

[26]Schmidt, 'When Fieldwork Ends', p. 315.

[27]Geelhoed et al., 'In the Discomfort Zone'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that influence/accompany terrorism research without feelings of analytical shortcomings.[28] Thus, through the emerging debate on reflexivity in terrorism, scholars have begun more conversations about the power dynamics and ethical and methodological complexities associated with terrorism field research. For instance, Schmidt's reflection on her experience interviewing guerrillas and paramilitaries in Colombia highlights and demonstrates how researcher positionality affects ethical dilemmas that continue when fieldwork ends in conflict-affected areas. Hence, it emphasizes the importance of 'preparing researchers for ethical dilemmas after fieldwork, including how to manage complex relationships with research participants, especially when those participants are current or former insurgents'.[29] In a related vein, Geelhoed et al., critically reflecting on their experiences conducting long-term fieldwork in a range of different radical or extremist milieus, highlight how certain aspects of the ethnographic encounters not only generated complex emotions but also reconfigured the researchers' relationship with a research participant, and also with a wider community of reference, including both academic and non-academic. Specifically, they underscore how long-term ethnographic encounters with extremist research participants generate a mixture of complex emotions, such as discomforting sympathy and the simultaneous feeling of closeness and distance.[30] While these emotions disrupt the existing notions of proximity that long define the researcher-research dynamic, they also underscore the importance of situational ethics in managing research encounters.[31]

In a slightly different vein, Gelashvili and Gagnon's reflection as women conducting research in a male-dominated far-right extremist context underlines how questions about power and gendered dynamics are crucial to reflexive methodology discourse in terrorism studies. Importantly, they argue that these reflexive accounts, apart from helping us more adeptly comprehend the far-right phenomenon, also underscore the role of gender positionality in understanding far-right extremism.[32] Inherent in the different accounts captured above are two vital interconnected points. First, reflexive methodology discourse in terrorism is more comprehensible vis-à-vis the distinctive peculiarities of terrorism and political violence. Second, researching terrorism and related issues of political violence remains a complex endeavour that is still delicately imbued with swaths of power dynamics, which, if not carefully accounted for, could potentially shape the process of knowledge production. Thus, according to Rodermond and Weerman, reflexivity is not just limited to highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of research methodologies in the field; it also encompasses detailing how elements of self-awareness and self-accountability constitute the overall process of knowledge production.[33]

However, despite the reflexive turn in terrorism studies and the rich literature emerging on it, there remain some underexplored aspects of the debate. Put differently, the debates around how issues of positionality, researcher-research participant power dynamics, socio-political bias, and ethical influences the process of knowledge production in terrorism studies are yet to be fully understood. More prominently and of direct concern in this article is a noticeable dearth of representation of African voices on reflexive methodology discourses within terrorism studies. However, this is changing as African-based are increasingly contributing to reflexive methodology in IR, particularly by 'academic thirdworlders', 'academic homecomers', or 'diasporic researchers' – African research who return to their country to do fieldwork.[34] However, their – betweenness – status leads

[28]Geelhoed et al., 'In the Discomfort Zone'.
[29]Schmidt, 'When Fieldwork Ends', p. 313.
[30]Geelhoed et al., "In the Discomfort Zone'.
[31]Geelhoed et al., 'In the Discomfort Zone'.
[32]Gelashvili and Gagnon, 'One of the Boys'.
[33]Rodermond and Weerman 'The Strengths and Struggles'.
[34]Richard Fosu, COVID-19 Induced Ethnographic Distance: Remote Fieldwork, Ethical Challenges and Knowledge Production in Conflict-Affected Environments. International Journal of Qualitative Methods (2024). 23, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241244871; Adebayo and Njoku, 'Local and Transnational Identity', 20; Oyawale, A. The impact of (counter-)terrorism on public (in)security in Nigeria: A vernacular analysis', *Security Dialogue,* 53:5 (2022), pp. 420–37,

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to specific type of knowledge influences by their insider-outsider positionality.[35] Thus, this article, while reiterating the need for further scholarly engagement with reflexive methodology discourses in terrorism studies, also posits that by overlooking the voices of African scholars in existing debates, the literature risks undermining the need for scholars to embrace self-accountability regarding how their positionalities and methodological complexities influences the production of knowledge in terrorism studies.[36]

This article is based on the reflections of an African-based scholar's ethnographic field encounter with counterterrorism security elites (CTSE). The aim is to examine the corollaries of socio-cultural norms of hierarchy and reciprocity on data access and knowledge production related to (PCVE) in an African context. It explores the experiences of an African-based researcher studying the discursive practices of the PCVE measures of an African state. It underscores relational positionalities, power dynamics, deployment of norms of hierarchy and seniority in the researcher-research participant relations when interviewing African CTSE elites. The article advances the importance of methodological openness in interviews in terrorism research. It also underscores the significance of reflexively engaging with dilemmas and challenges that emerge during fieldwork with state (counter)terrorism actors through situational ethics and contextually adaptable socio-cultural norms as reflexive tools.

This article is not isolated from the larger body of emerging literature on reflexive turn in terrorism studies. Rather, the article builds on the existing studies and extends the ongoing conversation about the importance of bringing the experiences and daily realities of conducting empirical research in the field to the forefront. This is done in a number of ways. First, the article deepens our understanding of the concept of situational ethics in terrorism studies. Situational ethics are almost inevitable ethical dilemmas that researchers have to contend with while undergoing fieldwork. Scholars posit that in negotiating these dilemmas, it is exclusively the researcher's task to improvize through ethically sensible measures. This article, by emphasizing the role of the contextual norm of reciprocity as a valuable reflexive tool in managing ethical situations where (counter)terrorism actors-interviewees believe that agreeing to an interview will directly improve their personal situation,[37] underscores the significance of comprehending situational ethics as a collaborative effort between researchers, research participants, and a shared understanding of the inherent socio-cultural norms of the research context. Second, by underscoring the pertinence of and centring reflexivity and context-based positionality in terrorism studies' methodology, the article contributes to advancing the empirical possibilities and limitations involved in fieldwork.

The study context and the study

Researchers are increasingly acknowledging interviews as a vital methodological technique,[38] as the pertinence of empirical research and primary sources in terrorism studies continues to grow.[39] These in-depth conversations, be it with violent armed actors,[40] and state counterterrorism officials,[41] avail researchers of rich data, rarely obtainable via other methods. Specifically, scholars ascertain that interviews provide a means to bridge the divide between scholars and their subject

https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106211063796; David Mwambari, 'Local positionality in the production of knowledge in northern Uganda', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2019), p. 18, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919864845; Temitope Oriola, and Kevin Haggerty, 'The ambivalent insider/outsider status of academic 'homecomers': Observations on identity and field research in the Nigerian Delta', *Sociology* (2012), pp. 46:540–548, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511425559; Njoku et al., 'Positionality and knowledge production', p. 18.

[35] McFarlane-Morris, 'Home Sweet Home?".

[36] Geelhoed et al., 'In the Discomfort Zone'; Rodermond and Weerman, 'The Strengths and Struggles'.

[37] Dolnik, A. 'Conducting field research'.

[38] Hoffman, 'Current Research on Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict', p. 28; Dolnik, 'Conducting field research'.

[39] Sageman, 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research'; Schuurman, 'Research on Terrorism'.

[40] Horgan, 'Interviewing the terrorists'.

[41] Clutterbuck and Warnes, 'Interviewing Government and Official Sources'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of enquiry.[42] Nonetheless, elite interviewing with state counter-terrorism actors is characterized by unique challenges that significantly influence empirical research in terrorism studies. The politically charged nature of the issue, as well as the sensitivity that it accrues, leads to a situation wherein state counterterrorism officials consider discussions around it secretive and off-limits to the public. No context best exemplifies the above than Nigeria, where the prevailing security culture equates security research with 'spying'. This is most pervasive around issues of terrorism and counterterrorism, where information remain closely guarded and heavily securitized.[43] Emerging from decades of military leadership and an inordinate influence of the military in the country's post-military era and its domestic affairs,[44] Nigeria's security architecture is built around punitive and coercive structures and practices such that it is been aptly captured as a militarized democracy.[45] The emergence of issues of terrorism in 2009 and the country's heavy emphasis on hard security measures as its default response mechanism further enhanced the securitization of discourses around terrorism and counterterrorism,[46] thereby complicating access to information and knowledge production on terrorism. By implication, issues bordering on security broadly, and more specifically, discussions on terrorism and counterterrorism, became difficult to have with state officials. Security and counterterrorism actors in Nigeria, with their privileged access to intimate knowledge of counterterrorism practices, became excellent gatekeepers of counterterrorism data, erecting structural obstacles for academics to access information and also challenging research inquiries into the state's counterterrorism practices. An example of this obstacle is the burdensome (often impossible) administrative clearance that is needed to be secured to speak to counterterrorism actors or visit spaces where counterterrorism practices occur. Thus, implying that gaining access to security actors is hard enough; gaining their trust and building rapport with them is even more difficult. Once rapport is established, another task is to not be too distant and close, hence balancing proximity. This trend is axiomatic of the challenge entailed in researching African security elites.[47]

My doctoral research critically examined the nexus between Nigeria's P/CVE Measures (including the terrorist deradicalisation and rehabilitation programme) and the nature of the Nigerian state. The global PCVE norms emphasize a less-coercive approach to managing violent extremism, with different regional and national states adopting this approach in their domesticated action plans.[48] Nigeria's national action plan on PCVE followed a similar pattern, adopting a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach.[49] As a result, one of my research aims focused on the discursive practice of Nigeria's P/CVE, inter alia policy design and implementation, as well as the various institutional practices involved in its implementation. Thus, by default, I had to interface, engage with CTSE, and immerse myself in various state-sponsored PCVE events, workshops, and panels. Scholars studying terrorism and counterterrorism in Nigeria highlight the dearth of 'thick' empirical studies that draw on primary data to understand Nigeria's soft counterterrorism

[42]Hoffman, 'Current Research on Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict', p. 28.

[43]Njoku, E. T. 'Politics of conviviality? State-civil society relations within the context of counter-terrorism in Nigeria', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations,* 31 (2020), pp. 1063–76, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-017-9910-9.

[44]Samuel Fury Childs-Daly, *A History of the Republic of Biafra: law, crime, and the Nigerian civil war* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 272.

[45]Micheal Nwankpa, *Nigeria's Fourth Republic, 1999–2021: A Militarised Democracy* (Routledge, 2022), p. 196.

[46]Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, 'The ongoing campaign of terror in Nigeria: Boko Haram versus the state', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 2*:(3) (2013), pp. 52–52, https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.cl; Freedom C. Onuoha, 'The islamist challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis explained', *African security review*, 19:2 (2010), pp. 54–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2010.503061.

[47]Damman and Christopher, 'Charming the Generals'.

[48]David H Ucko, 'Preventing violent extremism through the United Nations: the rise and fall of a good idea', *International Affairs,* 94:2 (2018), pp. 251–70, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix235.

[49]Akintayo, Joshua. 'Whole-of-Society Approach or Manufacturing Intelligence? Making Sense of State-CSO Relation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria', *Critical Studies on Terrorism,* 17:3 (2024), pp. 659–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2360272.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

approach.[50] Thus, I was saddled with the task of negotiating and circumventing my access around a closely guarded counterterrorism knowledge base, to get empirical data which was expedient for my research. While I was not unfamiliar with these challenges, considering that my MSc between 2016 and 2017 examined at a much smaller level, countering violent extremism in Nigeria, I anticipated encountering a much bigger conundrum, as the space for engagement between the Nigerian state and the civil society in terms of counterterrorism had shrunken significantly.[51]

As a Nigerian doctoral student studying in a UK higher education institution based in Europe, I had to return to Abuja, the headquarters of Nigerian security agencies, to conduct extensive ethnographic fieldwork spanning more than one year. Hence, from October 2022 to October 2023, I conducted ethnography – wherein I had formal interviews with CTSE and non-participant observation – at closed-door PCVE workshops organized by security agencies. From October 2023 to December 2023, informal conversations and discussions continued with CTSE participants. While so many participants either outrightly participated or did not follow up with discussions after agreeing to be interviewed, I successfully conducted 35 interviews with 28 security actors involved in designing or implementing various components of Nigeria's PCVE measures. This extended period of ethnography was necessary considering the difficulty of accessing these participants. This period, while serving as a valuable way of gathering quality data, also provided the opportunity to build trust and rapport with CTSEs as these participants were trained to protect state security secrets and to erect barriers when questioned.[52] It is important to note that I was very conscious of the leverage and positional advantage that my Institutional affiliation availed me in this regard. This is considering the perspective that, when a research study is anchored in a Global-North institution, more often than not, the researcher usually enjoys some form of funding support and less complex visa processes. However, this very affiliation also potentially increases the researcher to vulnerability, increases scepticism among security actors, and ultimately staggering the cultivation of interpersonal trust. Contrastingly, a Global-South context often reverses the equation – resources and international mobility become precarious, but shared civic memory and institutional proximity can accelerate rapport, while also exposing the scholar to intricacies of patronage politics and heightened personal-security risks. This fluid positionality exemplifies argument by Adebayo and Njoku that national belonging is never a fixed guarantee of access; rather, insiderness is constantly recalibrated as researchers cross funding, institutional and geopolitical borders.[53]

Talking to the state: interviewing counter-terrorism security elites (CTSEs) in Nigeria

While I only began interviews in October 2022, entering the field and gaining trust with CTSE began upon arriving in Abuja in August 2022. Through a combination of previously established contact with CTSE during my MSc and referral from a senior academic studying Nigeria's counterterrorism practice with extensive fieldwork interviewing counterterrorism actors in Nigeria, I was able to negotiate access with a CTSE within the intelligence community. Importantly, I established rapport after conducting an interview in the early stage of the fieldwork with one of the interviewees (hereinafter referred to as Mr X). The referral from the senior academic likely facilitated the CTSE establishing rapport with me, as I was coming from a familiar person. For instance, Mr X had alluded that it could have been difficult for me to access him or any of his colleagues if the referral had not come from the senior academic whom he is familiar with; this, according to him, was due to the sensitive nature of my research. Building rapport with the participant is vital for success in terrorism studies research, where in-depth interviews, participant observations

[50] Akintayo, 'Whole-of-Society Approach or Manufacturing Intelligence?'.

[51] Emeka T Njoku, 'The state and the securitization of civil society organizations in Nigeria', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 51:1 (2022), pp. 190–215, https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211003256.

[52] Damien Van Puyvelde, 'Qualitative research interviews and the study of national security intelligence', *International Studies Perspectives,* 19:4 (2018), pp. 375–391, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky001; Robert Mikecz, 'Interviewing elites: Addressing methodological issues'. *Qualitative inquiry*, 18:6 (2012), pp. 482–493, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412442818.

[53] Adebayo and Njoku, 'Local and Transnational Identity'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and ethnographic studies are used.[54] It is important to note that broaching access to Mr X also presented its unique dilemmas and situational conundrum that may have shaped the findings of the study. Mr X, a senior CTSE, who could also be described as a gatekeeper within the scope of this article, became the major source through which other interview participants were recruited. This phenomenon of gate-keeper dependency shaped both who spoke and what could be spoken. Considering that access had to pass through Mr X due to the closed nature of security institutions to research, I was conscious that the study was susceptible to Mikecz's cautionary note on elite brokerage and narrowed sample; twin issues in security sector ethnography.[55] This narrowed sample manifested in the gender representation of the CTSE participants, as Mr X could only refer me to one female CTSE participant. Hence, this gendered imbalance meant that the study could not sufficiently account for female CTSE voices.

However, notwithstanding the importance of the referral by Mr X in negotiating access and 'getting me into the room', I still encountered varying forms of obstacles with CTSEs. For instance, there was noticeable scepticism from some CTSE participants about the intersectionality of my identity as a young male researcher, combined with my research topic's inherent sensitivity. These intersectional issues served as an initial barrier to interviewing some CTSE participants. Ajil notes that navigating a securitized identity in a securitized research field can play an ambivalent role, both constraining and facilitating access.[56] Both the referral from Mr X, the CTSE officer, and my identities as an academic researcher and an academic homecomer provided me access to this hitherto inaccessible institution. However, it is essential to note that notwithstanding my familiarity with Mr X, he ensured that I did not break his professional duty of confidentiality.

Despite this seemingly favourable situation with Mr X, our conversations were largely cautious, with both of us taking cognizance of our positionalities. Specifically, his conversations and interactions were subtly imbricated with scepticism and trust issues towards me. In the reflexive methodology discourse in terrorism studies, while interpersonal relations between researchers and study participants are considered vital and have a prominent impact on the quality of knowledge produced, they are also often viewed as a superficial relationship and an almost unattainable phenomenon. Thus, the researcher-research participant relationship in this context is often seen as ambivalent in nature.[57] Furthermore, Mr X referred me to some of his colleagues, and I conducted about half of the interviews off-record, and I could only take field notes. As a result, I had to be flexible with my research design, and adapt to emerging dynamics in the field in order to address the challenge while also accommodating the diversity of security elites. Thus, I had to adopt different strategies during interviews. For some interviews, I adopted the semi-structured conversational interview approach for some interviews, while others were strictly formal interviews. At other times, when I was unable to take field notes during the process due to CTSEs refusing me the opportunity, I adopted a strategy of memorizing conversations, events, and phenomena, and then developed field notes afterwards.

An experience worth mentioning was the aftermath of my participation in a closed-door PCVE workshop organized by one of the security institutions. I could only access this workshop through referrals from Mr X, and I had to stay behind to establish contacts with some senior CTSEs. One of them, whom I had spoken to and who signified interest in participating and would later interview, had offered me a ride in his automobile out of the security facility to the nearest bus stop. During our short trip, the CTSE had already started giving quality responses to my research. The circumstances in which this occurred could not allow me to get oral consent (although I did eventually get his oral consent at a later interview in his office), as I could not stop his talk. Thus, I had to sit

[54]Magnus Ranstorp, 'Research Challenges Involved in Field Study on Terrorism in the Middle East', in *Conducting Terrorism Field Research: A Guide,* ed. Adam Dolnik (Routledge, 2013), pp. 46–61; Speckhard, 'Research challenges involved in field research and interviews'.

[55]Mikecz, 'Interviewing elites'.

[56]Ajil, 'Studying Terror Through My I's'.

[57]Geelhoed et al., 'In the discomfort zone'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

through the short ride, memorizing the responses I had gotten and only took notes when I had settled down in my space. In reflexive methodology debates, shared car journeys are argued to be productive research spaces for research albeit depending on research context, focus, and security considerations.[58] Thus, the action of the CTSE to begin research conversation in his private car as we both journeyed alone, rather than amid his colleagues where we had both departed from, could be interpreted as being more comfortable sharing knowledge about counterterrorism practices in his trusted space without fear and anxiety of being bugged or monitored.

Furthermore, in other scenarios, I willingly paused taking notes after observing that participants' CTSEs punctuated their responses and waited for me to finish taking my notes before continuing with their responses. Upon realizing that this was distorting the flow of the conversation where the participant had informed me beforehand, they were short on time. These various instances of improvisation skills and adaptability employed demonstrate arguments in the reflexive methodology debates on the importance of researchers adopting in-field reflexivity and adaptable self-techniques to fit emerging situations while not stifling research participants, especially security elites.[59] Adopting these different strategies were expedient to position myself to gain quality data from conversations and navigate the power imbalances that emerged during the process.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the ethical contours of my engagement with CTSE participants were complex, reflecting the relational and situational dynamics that underlie security-sector ethnography and fieldwork. Explicitly, while participants gained from our interactions, I must equally acknowledge the multifaceted ways in which I, as the researcher, benefited from these conversations. Failing to do this is tantamount to hypocrisy and risks undermining the core of reflexivity. As such, the principle of self-reflexivity necessitated that I reflect on and acknowledge my own privileged access to primary data through exclusive interviews, sustained post-research updates on security developments, and insider insights into evolving policies and operational trends on Nigeria's counter-terrorism and security governance. Hence, just as participants leveraged on my 'expertise' for professional advancement, the same also applied to me as the researcher, as the benefits were instrumental for my professional advancement as well. This includes allowing me to expand my fieldwork beyond the original scope by leveraging these connections to engage additional actors and broaden the research scope, which in turn provided me with more empirical insights that formed the basis of writing research grant proposals, making me more competitive in the brutal academic job market. Undoubtedly, this asymmetry, in which I accrued academic capital and epistemic authority, risks reproducing extractive logics unless critically interrogated.[60] This created a dilemma, especially with regard to the principle of reciprocity and its role in shaping the ethnographic encounters. This dilemma crystallized as a question that lurked in my mind throughout the process: How can I conduct a study aimed at questioning hegemonic power structures and entrenched state centrism in (counter-)terrorism practices while engaging with privileged security-sector actors who may have been complicit in marginalizing and repressing one way or the other? Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that my research has not uncritically reproduced the narratives of powerful state actors, as evidenced by works emanating from the research thus far. If anything, it challenged the epistemological dominance of state-centrism in Nigeria's counter-terrorism,[61] while also illuminating the voices of marginalized people,[62] and the ripple effects of state-centric

[58]Lynch, G. 'Driving together: Shared car journeys as research space', *Qualitative Research*, 0 (2024), pp. 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241255251.

[59]Tadek Markiewicz, 'Talking to the state: Interviewing the elites about what's Not to Be said', *International Studies Perspectives,* 25:2 (2024), pp. 265–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekad013; William Harvey, 'Strategies for Conducting Elite Interviews', *Qualitative Research,* 11:4 (2011), pp. 431441, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404329.

[60]Pain, Rachel. 'Social geography: participatory research', *Progress in human geography,* 28:5 (2004), 652–663, https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132504ph511pr.

[61]Akintayo, 'Whole-of-Society Approach or Manufacturing Intelligence?.'

[62]Akintayo, Joshua. 'Sulhu as local peacebuilding', *Peacebuilding (*2025), pp. 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2025.2450574.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

counter-terrorism practices on everyday people.[63] This aligns with dominant perspectives in CTS scholarship that foreground critique as a form of resistance and emancipation.[64]

However, despite all of the above, my gender positionality was not without consequence. While I cannot definitively claim that my male identity made male CTSE officials more open to me, it is difficult to also discount the access it facilitated. For instance, I reckon that my performance of masculinity such as keeping long unshaved beard, appearing in full traditional male attire (Kaftan), physical comportment, and occasionally meeting at staff clubs and officers mess outside working hours and on weekends, all resonated with the hypermasculine ethos of military institutions in Nigeria,[65] thus enabling entry into spaces that might otherwise remain closed. Nonetheless, this also inadvertently reproduced gendered hierarchies by limiting my engagement with female CTSE participants. For instance, I could only access one female CTSE participant, and she insisted on having the conversation in the presence of a male colleague. This further deepened the obstacles and complexities that I had to surmount. Explicitly, it presented a paradox wherein accepting the proposed arrangement risked normalizing patriarchal oversight; while declining it would have also erased a rare female perspective and reinforced existing silences. I navigated the impasse by directing opening and closing questions exclusively to her, explicitly acknowledging her authority as the main interviewee. Notwithstanding this, I reflected on how this gendered dynamics was also axiomatic of broader critiques in CTS of how researchers can unwittingly reinforce the patriarchal structures embedded within security sectors.[66]

Taken together, these positional and ethical complexities required deploying situational responsiveness. One of such was acquiescing to overt and covert requests from participants to review academic and professional documents, such as unpublished research, assignments from institutional in-service training, and draft policy frameworks, as informal tokens of reciprocity. While ethically fraught, these acts became necessary trade-offs that facilitated deeper access and sustained engagement; an engagement that is needed in an ongoing effort to foreground the emancipatory potential of a reflexive account of researchers with the field of terrorism studies and international security.[67] Particularly, by deconstructing the prevalent spy culture that pervades Nigerian security institutions (especially counter-terrorism practices), making it opaque and impenetrable to researchers, I contribute to demystifying state security architectures by urging for sustained enquiry into the 'black box' of counter-terrorism governance. By doing so, inviting more studies from Global South researchers within the critical tenet of terrorism studies to engage with state counter-terrorism actors in their work and also openly reflect on their experiences, while being self-critical. The following sections explore how power dynamics interact with prevailing social norms in the research setting, shaping and influencing my ethnographic field experiences in elite interviewing.

Hierarchy, seniority, and power in interviewing counter-terrorism security elites (CTSEs)

> I left the Director General's Office with my interlocutor, who granted me access to the hitherto inaccessible building. We were both on our way back to his office downstairs, and my interlocutor told me I would have to comply with whatever I was told or asked to do here. He

[63]Akintayo Joshua. 'Beyond a Silver Bullet: Nigeria's Borno Model and its Paradoxes of Vernacular Security'. in *New Directions in Vernacular Security Research*. ed. Lee Jarvis, Michael Lister, and Akinyemi Oyawale (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), Forthcoming.

[64]Gunning, Jeroen. 'Babies and bathwaters: reflecting on the pitfalls of critical terrorism studies', *European Political Science,* 6 (2007), pp. 236–243, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210144; Richard Jackson, 'Knowledge, Power and Politics in the Study of Political Terrorism', in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, ed. Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 66–83.

[65]Oyawale, Akinyemi. 'The state, Boko Haram, and vernacular security: gendering terrorism and counterterrorism in Nigeria', *Security Dialogue,* 57:4 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106251351869.

[66]Laura Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Security: Discourse as Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008).

[67]Njoku et al., 'Positionality and Knowledge Production'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

said that was the only way I could get what I wanted. On our way downstairs, we met another man, and I immediately recognised him. I had seen him severally on mainstream and social media. My interlocutor and the Man exchanged pleasantries, and he asked me if I knew the Man. I responded affirmatively, bowed my head, greeting him, and my interlocutor told him we had been looking for him. I felt enthusiastic that this was the proper respondent I was to speak with. The three of us climbed back the stairs and went to his office.

On our way to his office, my interlocutor made a brief introduction and told the Man what I was there for. The Man enthusiastically replied and said, 'that's good. I also started my PhD and am just stuck on this proposal thing'. My interlocutor interjected and told the Man that he had found the right person to help him go through it and guide him with the proposal. He described me as a young, vibrant, upcoming scholar. My interlocutor left us midway and returned to his office, leaving I and the Man. We got to his office, and he told me about his PhD idea.[68]

The above vignette from my fieldnote vividly speaks to the intersecting complementarities of social norms – hierarchy, seniority, researcher identity, and CTSEs power – immersed heavily in ethnographic field encounters in African counterterrorism contexts. The nature of African societies is such that social norms and precepts shape interactions, interpersonal relations, and institutional practices.[69] Thus, there is an interconnection and logical inseparability of norms, actions, and structures in African contexts.[70] This perspective is premised on the underlying logic that institutions and society tend to perform optimally when there is an appreciable understanding of norms, customs, and standards, whether spoken or unspoken. In other words, adherence to these norms, which are perceived as moral forces and guiding mechanisms for behaviour, determines the efficacy of institutions.[71] Likewise, conformity or deviance from these social norms impacts the functional or dysfunctional status of societies and institutions. A matrix of diverse norms and precepts underpins Africa at various micro- and macro-levels. For instance, a gerontocratic ladder shapes interpersonal relations in Africa, placing a premium on norms of hierarchy and seniority.

Similarly, the behaviour of actors gets to be shaped by and along the prevailing norms within which they are exist. Thus, actors are embedded into the normative contexts of institutions and context, and as such, their behaviour is a reflection of the normative ideas within which they are socialized. Considering this, scholars posit that counterterrorism institutions are norm-producing institutions, and that power constitutes the lifeline of the institutions and the actors performing counterterrorism tasks.[72] To exemplify this, Oyawale argues that the norms of power and supremacy animate the societal construction of a Nigerian military counterterrorism actor.[73]

Before arriving in Abuja for my fieldwork in August 2022, I had prepared and mapped out plans that I thought would be sufficient to overcome the challenge of accessing CTSE. I pre-empted encountering myriad challenges despite my familiarity with my research contexts. While fieldwork planning and preparations are crucial standard operating practices in qualitative research,[74] the messiness embedded in it implies that it is subject to disruptions, specifically when research subjects are security elites. Bilio and Hiemstra describe the messiness that researchers often encounter/experience when conducting fieldwork.[75] Nonetheless, scholars urge that planning and

[68]Author's Fieldnotes, November 2022.

[69]Jean-Philippe Platteau, Institutions, social norms and economic development (Routledge, 2015), p. 361.

[70]Micheal Kpessa-Whyte, 'Reciprocity, mutuality, and shared expectations: the role of informal institutions in social protection in Africa', *Contemporary Journal of African Studies,* 5:2 (2018), pp. 1–25, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-12bd285c0a.

[71]Kpessa-Whyte, 'Reciprocity, mutuality, and shared expectations'.

[72]Damman, and Day 'Charming the Generals'.

[73]Oyawale, 'Gendering terrorism and counterterrorism in Nigeria'.

[74]Matthew N. Beckmann and Richard L. Hall. 'Elite interviewing in Washington, DC'. *Interview research in political science* (2013): pp. 196–208, https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801467974-013.

[75]Emily Billo and Nancy Hiemstra. 'Mediating Messiness: Expanding Ideas of Flexibility, Reflexivity, and Embodiment in Fieldwork', *Gender, Place & Culture,* 20:(3) (2013), pp. 313–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.674929.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contingency arrangements be made to mitigate unplanned challenges that may arise.[76] Thus, one of the plans for mitigating the challenge was to reach out to the publicly visible actors on social media through cold messaging. In these messages, I made sure to give a detailed description of myself, my research, and my institutional affiliation in a very respectful way. For instance, in these messages, the word 'sir' was constantly deployed at the end of almost every sentence I wrote. I did this to fully acknowledge and recognize the existence of social hierarchy between myself and the CTSEs participants, as well as to bestow upon them the status of seniority and respect, even before they explicitly demanded it. Similarly, I aimed to demonstrate my awareness and connection to socio-cultural norms. Furthermore, it indicates that exposure to the Western cultural context has not influenced our shared cultural norms, where young persons are expected to respect or even revere their elders. Specifically, this was aimed at counter-balancing viewpoints primarily held by African elders regarding the paradigmatic shift in and gradual erosion of African cultural norms due to the influx of globalisation and Western values.[77]

While this approach may have facilitated broaching a layer of access to elites, it is possible that my Western institutional affiliation, which is visible on my social media pages through which the cold messages were sent, could have mediated my access or my ability to fix and organize interviews. Given the respect and esteem Africans attach to foreign educational certifications and their holders, it is plausible that my Western educational identity facilitated the development of meetings with elites or contributed to building rapport. Western education or affiliation with its institution serves as a benchmark for success, leading people to view those with such qualifications as reliable, dependable, level-headed, and competent. This viewpoint highlights the discussions in the broader body of literature on reflexive International Relations (IR) regarding the specific difficulties involved in studying state actors and the significance of adaptability in fieldwork approaches, mindsets, and methodologies.[78] Moreover, the perspective resonates with the discourses in reflexive methodology in terrorism studies regarding how the deliberate use of identity can enable researchers to gain entry into research environments that are considered inaccessible due to the actions of non-state violent actors or state security actors.[79] Furthermore, it is also demonstrative of broader views, which posits that terrorism researchers can adopt and use their varying positionalities either directly or indirectly in the context of political violence that is studied.[80]

Nonetheless, my conversations with some CTSEs shed light on how the intersection of my identities and African social norms of seniority and hierarchy shaped my field experiences. My affiliation with a Western higher educational institution may have given me proximity to security elites. Conversely, being an African, I felt constrained by distinct African societal norms and precepts. Thus, my educational identity and youthfulness facilitated and complicated my engagement with security elites. One instance of hierarchy performance was noticeable when I met a CTSE, a senior military officer who had served in various capacities in the implementation of Nigeria's PCVE measures, specifically in the terrorist rehabilitation programme, in his office in November 2022. This interview primarily resembled a speech or lecture. While I could occasionally interpose a few remarks, it was far from an interview.

The participant dedicated sufficient time to describing his work and professional background, showcasing his extensive knowledge of my research topic. He consistently emphasized the challenge I faced in finding someone of his calibre, which he attributed to the scarcity of colleagues with first-hand practical experience in my field who would be willing to participate in an interview. He also spent his time presenting some of the speeches he has presented at various forums on my

[76]Markiewicz, 'Talking to the state'; Van Puyvelde, 'Qualitative research interviews'; Ruth Blakeley, 'Elite interviews', in *Critical Approaches to Security,* ed. Laura Shepherd (Routledge 2013), p. 11.

[77]Jimmy Chulu, 'Africa is largely influenced by foreign culture especially western culture. Has Africa now sacrificed her own culture on the altar of expediency? Has Africa now sacrificed her own culture on the altar of expediency', *SSRN (*2015), https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2671784.

[78]Markiewicz, 'Talking to the state'.

[79]Schmidt, 'When fieldwork ends'.

[80]Geelhoed et al., 'In the discomfort zone'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

research topic, and he claimed he knows more than his colleagues in the same institution and from other security agencies. It is essential to understand that the CTSE participants' internalisation of a norm that defines their institution may have facilitated their interactions with me, the researcher. The above illustrates debates in IR scholarship about how the actions and practices of state actors are shaped and influenced by constitutive norms.[81] Further, this is axiomatic of arguments that the socio-political spectrum in Africa performs, practices, and reproduces these norms at varying levels.[82] For instance, scholars argue that the norm of hierarchy, embodied in respect, seniority, and discipline, forms the foundation of security institutions in Africa, particularly military organisations.[83]

One study participant, a senior military officer, invoked an African proverb that says, 'What an old man sees from the ground, a child cannot see even if he stands on top of a mountain' as an attempt to prove to me that the knowledge I hold about my research topic is not enough: This is proverb is commonly attributed to African wisdom, emphasizing the value of experience and the insight that comes with age. While this proverb is open to various interpretations, I contend that the CTSE participant strategically used it to evoke specific symbolic power relations in light of our shared African identity. Specifically, the proverb was meant to depict that I still need to return home to gain sufficient practical understanding even with my exposure to the Western educational system. Its interpretation within the context reinforces the elite participants' assumption of the role of the 'elder', who bears wisdom through years of professional experience, particularly concerning (counter-)terrorism discourses.

Norms of seniority and hierarchy function as a social mechanism, regulating social interactions in many societies beyond Africa.[84] In Nigerian security institutions, these dynamics are mainly expressed through culturally inflected practices such as age-based strata and the privileging of elders' authority, which subsequently shape researcher-researched relations in distinctive ways. This hierarchical ordering practice and performance also reinforce and sustain power relations Thus, the proverb figuratively portrays me, the young researcher, as 'a child', who, although potentially benefiting from education in a Western institution, which figuratively captures the 'mountain top' according to the proverb, lacks the experience and knowledge of the 'elder', the elite participant. The above can be interpreted as a performance of the norm of hierarchy within the African context, wherein individuals considered junior in terms of age or social position are obligated not to argue and question anyone of higher societal hierarchy.[85]

For instance, the remarks by the CTSE participant regarding the scarcity of accessing and conversing with individuals with knowledgeable insights on my research are indicative of a security elite that is aware of the existence of a hierarchical disparity between researcher-researched, as well as conscious of this intersects with their power dynamics in influencing the research process. This highlights arguments that security elites recognize their 'ability to exert influence' through their social capital, which stems from the specialized knowledgeability on issues of national security and secrecy, which tends to limit not only researchers' ability to identify and contact interviewees

[81]Allison Carnegie and Austin Carson. Secrets in Global Governance: Disclosure Dilemmas and the Challenge of International Cooperation (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 362; Thierry Balzacq and Benjamin Puybareau, 'The economy of secrecy: security, information control, and EU–US relations'. In *Secrecy in European Politics*, ed. Thierry Balzacq and Benjamin Puybareau (Routledge, 2020), pp. 24.

[82]Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, 'Intersectionalities and access in fieldwork in postconflict Liberia: Motherland, motherhood, and minefields', *African Affairs,* 118:470 (2019), pp. 168–81, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ady046.

[83]Humphrey Asamoah Agyekum, 'Monkeys play by sizes': the reconstruction of military hierarchy in Ghana's armed forces', *Africa*, 91:5 (2021), pp. 874–92, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000620; Ilmari Käihkö, 'No die, no rest'? Coercive discipline in Liberian military organisations', *Africa Spectrum,* 50:2 (2015), pp. 3–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971505000201; Robin Luckham, 'Institutional transfer and breakdown in a new nation: The Nigerian military', *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1971), pp. 387–406, https://doi.org/10.2307/2391760.

[84]Leopold Rosenmayr, 'More than wisdom: a field study of the old in an African village', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology,* 3 (1988): pp. 21–40, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00116958.

[85]Godwin K. Nukunya, Tradition and change: The case of the family (Ghana University Press, 1992), 34.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but also interviewees' willingness to accept interviews.[86] Consequently, this implies that the social capital of the elite participant becomes a mechanism that can be utilized in enforcing and shaping the researcher's social norms of behaviour, as well as configuring power relations between the researcher-researched. Furthermore, it illustrates the arguments presented in the reflexive methods literature of terrorism studies regarding the power dynamics that encompass researcher-researched relations.[87] Furthermore, it is possible to draw some parallels between my experience with this CTSE, and that of Ntanyoma's, during the study of armed groups in eastern DRC. For Ntanyoma, the ethnic identity (being of Banyamulenge roots, but raised in South Kivu) quickly flipped him from 'brother' or co-ethnic, to a suspected spy within minutes; thus, demonstrating the intersection between informal hierarchies and formal security structures. Ntanyoma navigated these hierarchical encumbrances by utilizing a research assistant of multi-ethnic roots (especially from rival communities), as well as circulating the anonymized interview notes after each interview round.[88]

Furthermore, in reflexive methodology discourse in international relations, critical interpretation of the proverb regarding seniority, respect, experience, and accumulated knowledge as enunciated by the elite participant, resonates with the debate that, norms around seniority and hierarchy, in particular, establish expectations for young people, leading to the emergence of a dynamic that influences research on African elites.[89] Specifically, it illuminates the ubiquity of the norm of hierarchy in African contexts, often manifested in encrypted moral codes which embody privilege, power, age, and respect for elders.[90]

Furthermore, the enunciation of the proverb with an awareness of a shared identity of 'Africanness' invokes on the researcher the pertinence of how conformity to the moral ethos is associated with acceptable standards of social behaviour in Africa. The adherence to norms such as respect for elders is driven by the fact that deviation or non-conformity is usually associated with social sanction, such as being labelled a belligerent.[91] This thus implies that not bestowing the elite participant respect for my silence in that context could have been interpreted as deviant behaviour, and I could have been perceived as someone lacking morals, which could have adversely affected the interviewing. This further reinforces the argument in reflexive methodology literature that African elite participants' performance of the norm of hierarchy interferes with the researcher's various positionalities, such as the insider-outsider perspective and the existence of shared identities, which creates an ambivalent situation where the researcher is simultaneously a powerless native subject and an influential researcher.[92]

Another demonstration of seniority, hierarchy, and power was noticeable during one interaction with a CTSE participant (a senior officer in the military). The participant invoked these norms along the trope of the elder-younger dynamic during the interaction. For example, while noting that I looked knowledgeable, calm, and rightly suited to do a PhD, the participant also acknowledged that my age was the right one to do a PhD, even though he didn't know my exact age. As a result,

[86]Van Puyvelde, 'Qualitative research interviews'; Harvey, 'Strategies for Conducting Elite Interviews'.

[87]Schmidt, 'When fieldwork ends'; Geelhoed et al., 'In the discomfort zone'.

[88]Ntanyoma, Rukumbuzi Delphin. 'Fieldnotes, Field Research, and Positionality of a "Contested-Native Researcher"', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 20 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211025454.

[89]Gino Vlavonou, 'Negotiating Positionality as a Student and Researcher in Africa: Understanding How Seniority and Race Mediate Elite Interviews in African Social Contexts', *International Studies Review*, 25:1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac064.

[90]Stella N, Okemwa, 'Rhetoric of remembrance: Privileged authority of elders and the contested gradations of seniority'. In *Ageing in Africa*, ed. Sinfree Makoni and Koen Stroeken (Routledge, 2017), p. 177; Kopano Ratele, 'Analysing males in Africa: Certain useful elements in considering ruling masculinities', *African and Asian studies,* 7:4 (2008), pp. 515–36, https://doi.org/10.1163/156921008X359641.

[91]Robert Cialdini and Melanie Trost, 'Social influence: Social norms, conformity and compliance', In The handbook of social psychology, ed. Fiske S. T., Gilbert D. T., & Lindzey G. (McGraw-Hill 1998); Jeffrey Fisher, 'Possible effects of reference group-based social influence on AIDS-risk behavior and AIDS prevention', *American Psychologist*, 43:11 (1988), pp. 914–20, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0003-066X.43.11.914.

[92]Isaac Dery, 'Negotiating positionality, reflexivity and power relations in research on men and masculinities in Ghana', *Gender, Place & Culture,* 27:12 (2020), pp. 1766–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2020.1748578.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

he inquired about my age, a question I was reluctant to address because I believed it went beyond the scope of my research. However, the African notion of not questioning elders, even when their comments seem offensive, bound me. Thus, I reluctantly told him my age, and the participant responded by highlighting that he was like a father to me. He then showed me pictures of his first child, who, according to him, was in the same age range or bracket as me.

The participant's actions are characterized by two interrelated demonstrations of power. On the one hand, the pictures of the participant's child serve as a demonstration of symbolic power, symbolically conveying a message of hierarchical positioning and ordering, with the aim of constructing a power dynamic. This is emblematic of Nye's theorization of the role of soft power in international politics. As Nye discussed, soft power is the capacity to 'make others want what you want', and it can be effectuated through images and symbols.[93] On the other hand, the participant sought to connect with me by mobilizing the principle of elderhood in African society while reinforcing the notion of power. The participant knew he possessed the knowledge and data that I needed and that I was at his mercy.

Consequently, he used the scenario to bolster his power status as a knowledge repository. He also implicitly used the principle of elderhood to compel compliance and respect from me. Furthermore, at some point during the interview, the participant spent a considerable amount of time exchanging accolades with his colleagues over a phone call and later apologized to me for keeping me waiting. While apologizing, he jokingly noted that I had no choice, even if he kept me waiting, and that I could spend the whole day with him because I was only a young man with no serious task other than reading and writing. The participant questioned my ability to undertake any other task besides being a researcher, thereby demonstrating his power to control the interview. Within the context of the research, this joke expressed the belief that academics lack utility beyond the confines of the Ivory Tower. While I disagreed with the viewpoint espoused through the joke, I was bound by the 'do not argue' rule of qualitative interviewing, especially with counterterrorism elites,[94] as well as by the overt hierarchical positioning established overtly through the pictures.

As a result, I had to control my reaction to the joke and maintain my composure. Added to this, I was aware that the CTSE participant was a hard-to-reach elite, so I was careful not to abuse the privilege of speaking to him during the conversation. The groups they study often condition researchers, leading them to either directly or indirectly adopt behavioural adjustments and adaptations to streamline the data collection process.[95] This participant's belief that my sense of agency as an individual revolves explicitly around my educational status resonates with the argument in the literature on IR methodology that a researcher's positionality as a graduate student conducting fieldwork with African elites is laced with myriads of dilemmas.[96] It also reflects arguments in the broader literature on the African researchers' experiences with a reflexive methodology, highlighting how the researcher's positionality of singlehood can tense field interactions with elites.[97]

Reciprocity, instrumentalisation, and power dynamics in interviewing counterterrorism security elites (CTSEs)

During my fieldwork, I noticed that my position as a young African, Western-affiliated PhD student came with certain expectations from my participants. The advantages of my academic institutions consistently linked my position to superior academic knowledge and opportunities for educational and professional fellowships and scholarships. As a result, some CTSE participants expressed their desire to pursue advanced academic and professional programmes and said they needed guidance

[93] Joseph Nye Jr, 'Soft power and American foreign policy', *Political science quarterly* 119:2 (2004), pp. 255–70, https://doi.org/10.2307/20202345.

[94] Blakeley, 'Elite interviews'.

[95] Geelhoed, et al., 'In the discomfort zone'.

[96] Vlavonou, 'Negotiating Positionality'.

[97] Adebayo and Njoku, 'Local and Transnational Identity'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on how to do so. Other participants positioned me as a competent 'teacher' who could assist them in achieving their professional goals. At this point, my position had shifted from that of a young, 'inexperienced' PhD researcher who does not know so much about the government's PCVE and Deradicalisation and disengagement Programs (DDP) measures to that of someone knowledgeable with much information and experience helpful to influence and change the life course and professional trajectory of CTSE participants.

After the first round of interviews, some participants expressed that the principles of reciprocity and shared expectations bound our interactions and conversations. For example, after an interview with a CTSE participant, a senior officer in the Armed Forces in October 2022 at his office, the participant said, '*You know the way it is in Nigeria, "you scratch my back, I scratch yours"". I tried my best to explain everything I know about your research work. I will also come to you for help when the time comes. I also want to do a master's*'[98]. This narrative was implicitly laden with norms of reciprocating the interview (which he had interpreted as offering me help). The participant deployed the metaphorical expression *'scratch my back, and I scratch yours*[99]' with the consciousness that, as a Nigerian, I am attuned to norms of reciprocating assistance, especially when such help would have been impossible or difficult to get ab initio. The norm of reciprocity and shared expectation encapsulates the act of doing a favour or offering a present to someone with the underlying expectation of receiving a reward in return, either immediately or in the future.[100] It also indicates a social technique where one forms personal ties with others to achieve goals that would otherwise be impossible to obtain.[101] It is an age-long practice rooted in pre-colonial Africa, but which finds its complex patterns within the architecture of post-colonial Africa,[102] thus serving as one of the influential expressions and natural expressions to establish connections and redistribute resources within the context of the challenging societal transformations.[103] This thus implies that reciprocal actions can be described as a silent norm in which Africans are socialized.

Furthermore, my socialisation and cultural training had prepared me to offer assistance or help, even as a younger person, to adults or elders (men and women) without explicit instructions. Hence, these dynamics heightened my awareness of the norms of reciprocity at play in my ethnography and made me re-approach my fieldwork as a completely different process imbricated with multi-dimensional relational positionalities and power relations and guided by a sense of mutual assistance. It also enhanced my awareness and positionality during interaction with other CTSE participants who possessed relevant information and could provide access. One outcome of sensitive awareness was when I noticed that some CTSE participants began adopting an informal approach while conversing with me after our initial interviews. While participants used 'young man' to address me during the initial phase of interviews, I observed a variation in how participants addressed me afterwards. For example, some elite participants would later address me as 'My Prof' and 'My Doc'. At other times, participants addressed me as 'My brother'.

This casualness by the CTSE participants is rooted in their belief that these expressions of niceties were needed from them to sway me to provide needed assistance with their respective objectives. Thus, the ensuing informalities were symbolic ways of obscuring any previously established formalities. In contrast, this change in approach can be said to be a way to give participants a soft-landing for the eventual fostering of interpersonal relations that emerged, as they typified attempts by participants to create a sense of acquaintance with me. Also, it seemed to have created a social distance that participants used to engage in more open and honest conversations about my research. This underscores arguments in the reflexive methodology discourse in terrorism studies,

[98]Personal Interview with senior officer of the Armed Forces, October 2023.

[99]Authors Fieldnotes, October 2023.

[100]Nukunya, 'Tradition and change'.

[101]Gora Hyden, 'Africa's Moral and Affective Economy', *African Studies Quarterly*, 9:(1 & 2) (2006), pp. 1–8.

[102]Mahmood Mamdani, Mahmood. 'Indirect rule, civil society, and ethnicity: The African dilemma', *Social Justice,* 23:1/2 (63–64 (1996), pp. 145–50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29766931.

[103]Carolyn S. Stauffer, "*Patterns of Social Reciprocity in the 'new' South Africa*" (PhD Diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2009).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the development of an interpersonal relationship between the researcher and the research participant is mirrors and symbolizes that broadly, social 'otherness' and 'closeness' tends to emerge during fieldwork with varying impacts on the researcher's emotions.[104] Furthermore, the experiences reflect the view that elite participants can re-deploy power dynamics in ways that present themselves in a favourable light.[105] This also mirrors the argument by Vlavonou on the ambivalent role of identities in negotiating social proximity with elite participants in Africa.[106]

Additionally, I noticed that this reciprocity dynamic reoccurred during another interview with a senior officer from the custodial agency at a restaurant in January 2023. I met the participant at a workshop that I attended to connect with potential respondents, which also served as a non-participant observation data-gathering approach for my research. During the interview, the participant directly told me before commencement that one of the reasons he agreed to speak to me was because he was working on pursuing doctoral research in my field of study on a related topic. He had been unsuccessful with admission applications so far. He then joked that he was sure that I would 'help' him secure admission and a scholarship. The participant's 'Joke' at the beginning of the interview was telling because it subtly invoked the principle of reciprocity, which was intended to create a sense of bond and friendliness which eases would potentially ease reciprocal relations. Specifically, my experience shows the relational positionalities that arise when the researcher redefines their identity through power relations during fieldwork.[107] On the other hand, the participant's use of what can be considered a humorous narrative to connect with me, the researcher exemplifies Kaaristo's assertion regarding 'everyday power dynamics' in the relationship between researcher and study partnerships, which posits that humour plays a fundamental role that helps to 'negotiate interpersonal dynamics', to foster a semblance of equality within the social hierarchy and alter rigid compliance with social standards.[108]

True to the participant's words, convivial post-interview relations emerged; the participant sought my guidance and direction on his academic programmes. At various times, the participant reached out to me to review his PhD proposal, provide advice on literature to read, universities to look out for in admission applications, and even request an academic reference letter (which I declined as I was not in the capacity to write). Interestingly, the participant's PhD proposal then got him an unfunded PhD admission while still seeking other funding options. In some other cases, I suggested specific potentials that the study participant could reach out to in their pursuit of a PhD position. In keeping with the norm of mutual assistance, this participant further played a crucial role by providing me with hard-to-get secondary literature on Nigeria's DDP. He also facilitated my access to other security elites, who provided rich data for my project, an opportunity that I most likely would not have gotten due to the sensitivity constructed around my research in Nigeria.

My post-field conversation with the participant has transcended researcher-participant relations and morphed into one wherein he willingly reaches out to me for professional counsel and advice. Inherent in this experience are several points captured in the reflexive methodology discourse in terrorism and political violence. First, it appears that the researcher-research participant relationship that emerged was instrumental. While on the one hand, the researcher used the study participant to gain further access into the field; participants also used the researcher as a career and professional resources in unexpected ways, all wound up under the shared consciousness of reciprocity. This is demonstrative of Schmidt's experience where study participants in Colombia used her as economic and financial resources in unpredictable ways, while she used participants to gain more insights about the field.[109]

[104] Geelhoed, et al., 'In the discomfort zone'.

[105] Aarie Glas, 'Positionality, power, and positions of power: reflexivity in elite interviewing', *PS: Political Science & Politics,* 54:3 (2021), pp. 438–42, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520002048.

[106] Vlavonou, 'Negotiating Positionality'.

[107] Adebayo and Njoku, 'Local and Transnational Identity'; Schmidt, 'When fieldwork ends', 316.

[108] Maarja Kaaristo, 'Everyday power dynamics and hierarchies in qualitative research: The role of humour in the field', *Qualitative Research,* 22:5 (2022), pp. 743–60, https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221096597.

[109] Interview with CTSE, November 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In another instance, a participant straightforwardly invoked the norm of reciprocity as a guiding principle for our conversations. In his words:

> As you can see that I have been as open as possible on this issue, something that you probably won't get from others because anything terrorism-related in classified is secretive and classified. It's now up to you to help me when I need your guidance, especially with my proposal. I also want to be like you.[110]

The above statement provides a deeper understanding of the ramifications and how the principle of shared expectation intersects with power relations/dynamics to shape fieldwork interactions. The statement: 'As you can see, I have been as open as possible on this issue, something that you probably won't get from others because anything terrorism-related is classified', reveals the participant's intent of fostering/building a relationship by trusting me with seeming confidential information. Adebayo and Njoku called this relational positionality to advance the research goal and how elite participants strategically utilize it in a context where security information and access are concealed under the pretext of national security exceptions.[111] More importantly, the statement, 'it's now up to you to help me when I need your guidance', speaks to the reciprocity inherent in fieldwork activities in African contexts.[112] Importantly, this mirrors arguments in the reflexive methodology literature on terrorism about the ethical complexities and challenges of maintaining contact with research participants.[113]

Furthermore, this narrative epitomizes the participant's attempt to connect with me based on a shared identity of Africanness and the informal practice of rendering help/service in expectation of another favour. It also exemplifies the power dynamics buried in ethnographic encounters, especially the powerlessness of the researcher in contexts where data and information on sensitive issues are closed off.[114] Thus, by subtly bragging about his openness to divulge inaccessible information that I needed and the bounds of reciprocity, field experiences with this participant facilitate post-field relations wherein the participant instrumentalizes relational positionalities to serve different purposes. Hence, the participants offer rich data and access to information in exchange for the researchers' assistance in reviewing policy briefs, academic articles, which part the participant's work responsibilities. In addition, the researcher is expected to offer advice and counsel on career and professional issues. Put differently, I had become a 'sounding board' for CTSE study participants on official and unofficial matters, and my response to these solicitations was a way of reciprocating difficult to get data, and also as a way nurturing further access to primary sources and CTSEs that I could interview. Thus, my professional resourcefulness which was made active by virtue of the social norms of the ethnographic context, influenced the redefining of the researcher-study participant relations. My previous outsider status to participants that were initially wary of speaking to me due to the sensitive nature of my research, notwithstanding their acknowledgement of its importance, changed to an insider status. Hence, my experience highlights the fluidity of positionality,[115] especially when tampered with by social norms of ethnographic contexts. Additionally, my experience resonate with Siddiqui and Turnbull's experience of researching violent political elites, where they highlight how notions of reciprocity intersect with power asymmetries.[116]

[110]Schmidt, 'When fieldwork ends: Navigating ongoing contact with former insurgents.

[111]Adebayo and Njoku, 'Local and Transnational Identity'.

[112]Dery, 'Negotiating positionality'.

[113]Schmidt, 'When fieldwork ends'.

[114]Marsha G. Henry, 'Where are you really from?: Representation, identity and power in the fieldwork experiences of a South Asian diasporic', *Qualitative Research,* 3 (2003), pp. 229–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941030032005.

[115]Glas, 'Positionality, power, and positions of power'.

[116]Siddiqui, N., & Turnbull, M., 'Elites and arbitrary power: ethical challenges and guiding principles for research with violent political actors'. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 24:6 (2024), pp. 599–619, https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2382189.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nonetheless these, it is important to acknowledge that not all interactions were explicitly transactional in nature. Some conversations did extend into moments of mutual enjoyment and exchange, collegial connections, thus highlighting arguments by Fujii[117] that researcher-researched relations are also influenced by enjoyment of sustained dialogue and curiosity. This dynamic of relationality underscores that reciprocity takes on a simultaneous and ambivalent role of being strategic and social.

Further reinforcing prevalence of the theme of reciprocity in fieldwork encounters, Niati's work studying West-African youth political networks reveals how reciprocity hinges on fluid positionality. Carrying two business cards: one with her US-university logo, and another plain without any logo; she let context dictate which 'identity' to present, converting privilege into practical resources such as visa support for local partners.[118] My experience embodies this in a bit different way. While my institutional affiliation granted me to CTSEs, it was my conformity to and behavioural willingness to 'key into' the shared socio-cultural norms, especially unspoken norm of reciprocating efforts, that actually recalibrated the relations with CTSEs, thus opening up the doors for gathering richer data.

In reflection, these experiences did evoke some contemplations on the type of knowledge to be produced. Importantly, I constantly thought about how the interpersonal relational positionality that had developed between myself and the CTSE participant could have consequences for my research. Specifically, I struggled with whether it was unethical to help these participants once data collection was over – or whether it was unethical not to help. I was hesitant to ask for formal advice, worried that my desire to help these participants would discount the credibility of my research – while still bounded by the subconsciousness that I had to 'care' for my participants, for them not to withdraw their participation. Further complicating this conundrum was that I had not received any guidelines on navigating this relational positionality post-field contact with participants. Rather, the ethics review process that my research had undergone tended to, in the words of Joel Busher, 'dehumanize' – downplay empathy – in fieldwork interactions rather than suggest ways to navigate the practical and emotional contingencies that emerge between researcher and research participants. Nonetheless, I was able to raise the issue with my supervisors during one of our monthly check-in sessions, as well as with the senior colleague who had helped me negotiate access with Mr X. Advises gotten from both suggested that while I do not compromise the ethical commitments binding my research – especially beneficence and nonmaleficence – me as a researcher and study participants remain humans with emotional feelings. This reflects Knott's argument that if researchers sustain communication with research participants post-data collection, then it implies that ethical responsibilities persist.[119] The uneasiness emanating from this experience speaks to by Geelhoed et al. in the reflexive discourse in terrorism studies on the critical role that discomfort can play as a reflexive tool.[120] According to them, 'In practice, using discomfort as a reflexive tool and critically examining feeling rules is a task to be continuously aware of. This is a task for not only the researcher but also research collaborators, especially in the case of early career researchers and their supervisors'.[121]

Conclusion

An African researcher's exploration of the complexities, insights, and dynamics of conducting fieldwork on terrorism through interviews with counterterrorism actors addresses a significant gap in our understanding of the reflexive turn in terrorism studies and has the potential to yield

[117]Fujii, Interviewing *in social science research.*

[118]Niati, Noella Binda. 'Navigating the In-between: A cross-Cultural researcher's fluid positionality in West Africa', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 23 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231200335.

[119]Eleanor Knott, 'Beyond the field: ethics after fieldwork in politically dynamic contexts', *Perspectives on Politics,* 17:1 (2019), pp. 140–53, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718002116.

[120]Geelhoed, et al., 'In the discomfort zone'.

[121]Geelhoed, et al., 'In the discomfort zone'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

significant benefits for scholars and students alike. The analysis of contextual socio-political and cultural norms and values in gaining access to fieldwork contexts where information and knowledge about (counter)terrorism is closely guarded, securitized, and largely restricted can provide valuable, insightful checkpoints or analytical benchmarks with which to better comprehend the methodologically demanding and ethically challenging nature of empirically researching terrorism. Furthermore, it also deepens our understanding of the struggles of doing terrorism research in Africa, the everyday reality of conducting empirical field research in terrorism studies, and the importance of openly and less vulnerably acknowledging researchers positionality, being self-aware and accountable of the role and influence of these positionalities, power dynamics, and epistemologies in the process of knowledge production. In doing so, the article's central argument is that conducting field research on terrorism in highly dynamic and complex contexts generates certain methodological dilemmas that would benefit from reflexive engagements and deeper engagements rather than trying to 'overcome' these dilemmas and challenges in ways that are analgesic and do not take us far.

To that end, this article contributes to the literature on reflexive methodology in terrorism studies in two ways. It enriches the concept of 'situational ethics'. It suggests that researchers and participants co-construct strategies to engage and navigate ethical dilemmas, influenced by shared cultural norms, particularly when interviewees expect benefits from participation. Second, the article builds on existing debates that underscore the pertinence of methodological openness in advancing the empirical possibilities and limitations involved in fieldwork.

It is important to note that the intention of the article is not to argue that norms of hierarchy, seniority, and reciprocity are exclusive to the African context, nor that all researcher-research relations with counter-terrorism security elites embody these dynamics. Rather, these dynamics, while found globally, take on culturally specific meanings in Nigerian security institutions that shaped my fieldwork encounter. As such, I would argue that holding these norms in mind and using them to structure and inform fieldwork practices in empirical research on terrorism can help towards effectively managing ethical and methodological dilemmas (See Table A1), as well as contribute to researchers more openly discussing these challenges. This can help move us collectively towards a more detailed and robust theorisation of the 'reflexive turn' in terrorism studies. To this end, it is hoped that the article stimulate further reflections from researchers studying (counter)terrorism and its various dynamics in Africa. Specifically, it would be intriguing to continue the discussion on the peculiarities of conducting research or studying (counter)terrorism institutions, structures, actors, and practices from other perspectives and positionalities.

The article notes conclusively the expedience of University ethics committee to be sensitive to the nuances and intricacies that underlie security sector fieldwork and ethnography, in order to facilitate rather than impede the research process. In lieu of this, the article ends with two reflexive recommendations or principles for University ethics committees. First, the entire gamut of obtaining consent and the consent itself should be treated as an iterative process. What this imply simply is that, in contrast to the situation wherein consent is considered and seen as a one-off signature episode, consent should rather be treated as a continuous and well-thought-out iterative process. As such, this will require that IRB committees make it expedient for researchers to document how permission is obtained, withdrawn, and re-established at every stage of the research process or journey, as well as in the and after changes occur with the research topic and in the context of study. The distinctive peculiarities accruing to undertaking security-sector fieldwork which has been through discussed above, thus makes it crucial for university ethics committees to begin to re-construe research consent as a living process, and one that requires constant check-ins. Second, often times, security-sector research tend to often begin on the default premise of being 'high-risk'. While this is not completely misplaced, the article suggests that University ethics committees should rather adopt a proportionate risk approach which begins with facts rather than with labels. That is, researchers should be allowed to identify possible areas of risk occurrence, possibly rank them, discuss mitigation strategies and how these projected risks and mitigation strategies to be taken could impact or affect the overall quality or value of the research project.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In essence, in the case that the anticipated social benefit outweighs the projected danger, IRB committees can grant approval, albeit with tailored conditions rather than issuing a blanket refusal. In doing this, University ethics committees can simultaneously avoid the usual bureaucratic bottlenecks that befall research projects which consequently affect progress, while also fulfilling their responsibility to protect and care.

Acknowledgements. The author appreciates Emeka Njoku, the anonymous reviewers and the editors, for their critical feedback which improved the quality of the article.

Appendix

Table A1. A checklist of practical issues to consider when undertaking Security-Sector ethnography. The table below is checklist containing practical issues guiding researchers to enter, navigate and exit security institutions with greater ethical rigour, methodological agility, and personal safety. Drawing primarily from my lived experience, and supplemented by literature on national security ethnography, the checklist highlights practical issues and tops that should be considered at four stages of fieldwork: pre-field, in-field, exit, and post-field. This checklist is intended to serve as practical guide for other researchers, and thus should not be seen as cast-in-stone; it is amenable to suit the context of study, and nature of study participants.

Research stage	Tips
Pre-field	**Map the ecosystem & gate-keepers** (create a matrix of institutions and agencies). ➜ Use referrals from scholars or practitioners to request Initial meetings.
	Risk & surveillance assessment.
	Secure-communication plan: decide which communication channels are safe for invitation letters and follow-ups.
	Ethics-board briefing: pre-empt likely concerns about classified data, access difficulties, and unequal benefit; bring a mitigation plan.
	Reflexive positionality memo: write down how issues such as age, gender, and social network ties might constrain or facilitate access.
In-Field	**Negotiate consent iteratively** (verbal, written, or tacit); recognize mundane moments when elites talk before the formality is done, then **retrospectively confirm** permission at opportunity. ➜ Maintain two note-taking modes: (i) unobtrusive jotting; (ii) *memorize-then-write* later in the event that recording is refused.
	Dynamic interview format: switch between semi-structured conversation and formal conversations to synchronize with rank, time pressure and mood.
	Micro-rapport moves: mirror address forms, respect rank-order seating, and observe pauses that signal classified discussions.
Exit	**Soft-close** each interaction: clarify next steps, offer a summary of how quotes will be used, and exchange non-institutional contact in case participant wishes to amend statements.
	Reciprocity gesture: share publicly available policy briefs or training materials of value to the officer. Be open to participants making reciprocal demands; but stay within ethical parameters.
	Data consolidation: transcribe memorized episodes, tag files with pseudonyms, export encrypted backups.
Post-field	**Security audit** of all digital traces.
	Member-check lite: circulate a two-paragraph summary of interview conversation to any participant who requests review.
	Reflexive memo: document how access routes, pauses in note-taking, or any reciprocity dynamics identity swayed the data.
	Ethics-board feedback: Upon request, file an addendum detailing unexpected risks and mitigation – useful for future researchers.
	Well-being debrief: schedule a professional or peer session to unload fieldwork luggage.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Joshua Akintayo is a PhD student at the School of Economics, Politics, and international Relations, at the University of Kent. His research interests lie at the intersection of preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE), conflict related sexual violence, and Peacebuilding with a focus on Africa. His works have been published in Peacebuilding, International Studies Perspectives, Critical Studies on Terrorism, Conflict, Security and Development, and South African Journal of International Affairs.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cite this article: Joshua Akintayo, 'Positionality, power, and reciprocity: Rethinking reflexive methodology in terrorism research', *European Journal of International Security*, 11 (2026), pp. 518–540. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10024