**Talking Stagnation: Thematic Analysis of Terrorism Experts’ Perception of the Health of Terrorism Research**

In 2014 Marc Sageman proposed that terrorism research had stagnated.[[1]](#endnote-1) The claim of stagnation has resulted in a period of collective review within terrorism studies. To date the fruits of this review has revealed a more cautiously optimistic view of the field than that proposed by Sageman. This article aims to add to this review by analysing the interviews of 43 guests from the first season of the *Talking Terror* podcast. Presented is a thematic analysis of their views on the overall health of terrorism research. The interviewees included both pre-and post-9/11 researchers. Through this analysis four themes are identified; Interdisciplinary Research and Researchers, Data, Applied Research, and Area/Field. The majority of interviewees were more optimistic than Sageman in relation to the overall health of the area. Analysis of their responses is presented alongside some recommendations for the future direction of the area.

Keywords: terrorism studies; academia; thematic analysis; stagnation; podcast.

**Introduction**

Within every field of research, it is important for there to be periods of collective review, allowing researchers to take stock of existing knowledge, methodological approaches, and research trends. These allow the important questions to be asked about the health of a field. Resultantly plans can be put in place as to how to best chart a path to further advance and strengthen a field. In recent years the study of terrorism has, yet again, been undergoing one of these periods of review. The history of terrorism research has demonstrated that some of the harshest and most frequent critiques have come internally from the terrorism studies community.[[2]](#endnote-2) The central critique has often been directed at the lack of empirical rigour,[[3]](#endnote-3) a critique which has even led to the emergence of a new branch of terrorism studies, namely *critical terrorism studies,* in response to the perceived need for ‘a more self-reflective, critical approach to the study of terrorism.’[[4]](#endnote-4)

The despondency of previous periods of review has recently been replaced by cautious optimism. Schuurman has identified the advances of empirical terrorism studies, with researchers now utilising a wider variety of data-gathering techniques.[[5]](#endnote-5) ‘Clusters of excellence’ have been identified in radicalisation research, which co-occur alongside studies which are ‘either methodologically or empirically poor.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Some have even argued that we are currently in a ‘golden age’ of terrorism research.[[7]](#endnote-7) Much of this review, and the resultant guarded positivity, was kickstarted as a reaction to Marc Sageman’s provocative accusation of ‘the stagnation in terrorism research’ presented in the pages of this journal in 2014.[[8]](#endnote-8)

***Stagnation of Terrorism Research?***

In his critique of modern-day terrorism research Sageman argued that in spite of the proliferation of post-9/11 state funding, as an area we are no nearer to answering the question ‘what leads a person to turn to political violence?’[[9]](#endnote-9) For Sageman the blame does not lie solely with academic researchers, it needs to also be shared by governments. This is due to governmental reticence to share primary data with the academic community. It is proposed that with the resultant vacuum of academic expertise there has been ‘an explosion of speculation’ where self-titled terrorism experts unversed in methodological rigour are able to dominate airwaves and public life, pushing their own political agenda. At the heart of Sageman’s argument is the belief that the most substantial terrorism research is taking place out of sight of academia. It is covertly conducted within the intelligence communities, and this bifurcation has resulted in ‘the stagnation of the field.’ In essence, he proposed, that we have reached a point where ‘intelligence analysts know everything but understand nothing, while academics understand everything but know nothing.’[[10]](#endnote-10)

The publication of Sageman’s stagnation article[[11]](#endnote-11) has garnered significant attention. According to Google Scholar, Sageman’s article has 297 citations,[[12]](#endnote-12) with many authors now debating the veracity of terrorism research. It was this debate that Max Taylor believed could be the most positive outcome of the original publication,[[13]](#endnote-13) a debate which this article aims to add to. Independent of Sageman Thomas Hegghammer was also questioning the health of terrorism studies. In a 2013 talk at the Naval War College Hegghammer argued that terrorism studies was suffering from a reputation problem within academia and a relevance problem in the policy world.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Similar to Sageman’s assertion that ‘academics understand everything but know nothing’ Hegghammer argued that there was not a single academic who could teach the CIA anything about Al-Qaeda. While academics struggle for relevance within policy circles, Hegghammer proposed that their reputation is simultaneously called into question by the academy.[[15]](#endnote-15) The reason for this reputational problem is two-fold with both scientific quality and political integrity being critiqued. As a result of the dual reputational and relevance problems Hegghammer called on researchers to engage more within their respective disciplines than within terrorism studies. For him this meant engaging in broader disciplinary specific research, rather than focusing purely on the terrorism specific debates of the day or pursuing an interdisciplinary research agenda. Alongside this Hegghammer criticised the failure of terrorism researchers to pool primary sources.[[16]](#endnote-16) In his eyes this has led to the inability of the terrorism research community to check whether there may have been biased interpretations of data. The consequence of this is reflected in Schuurman’s assertion that while there exist dozens of potential explanations for individual and organisational involvement in terrorism, that few if any have been substantially empirically validated.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Unsurprisingly the confrontational nature of Sageman’s piece drew responses from across the terrorism research community. Max Taylor argues that Sageman’s stagnation argument only serves to ‘sweepingly dismiss’ the endeavour of terrorism researchers.[[18]](#endnote-18) In doing so Sageman has failed to provide sufficient evidence to support his thesis. John Horgan and Jessica Stern were ‘puzzled’ by Sageman’s claims of stagnation.[[19]](#endnote-19) For them his commentary demonstrated an apparent ignorance of the high-quality research being done. Their perception was of a field ‘in ferment’ rather than stagnation. Stern[[20]](#endnote-20) asserted that with many terrorism researchers looking towards societal rather than individual risk factors it should not be surprising that the question posed by Sageman remains in search of a consensus answer to what Schanzer labelled an ‘impossibly broad question.’[[21]](#endnote-21) Echoing this Alex Schmid emphasised that Sageman’s question cannot be answered in a general way, and that our explanation of what leads a person to political violence must be addressed from the meso and macro levels, as well as the traditional micro-level approach.[[22]](#endnote-22) This is why we must not just look for the ‘vulnerabilities’ in the individual, but we must also question the role of social ecologies in leading people towards political violence.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Stern succinctly argues that the difficulty in answering questions relating to individual level decision-making ‘is not unique to terrorism experts.’[[24]](#endnote-24) In her eyes Sageman is arguing for terrorism scholarship to reach a standard of understanding higher than any other group of scholars aiming to comprehend and predict human behaviour have ever successfully achieved.[[25]](#endnote-25) The fact that we have not answered the fundamental question of what leads a person to political violence should not be seen as the stagnation of a field.[[26]](#endnote-26) It may in fact be more reflective of the complexity and heterogeneity of terrorist decision-making and behaviour.[[27]](#endnote-27)

According to Alex Schmid[[28]](#endnote-28) and others[[29]](#endnote-29) terrorism studies is greatly benefitting from the emergence of young scholars versed in a wide variety of disciplines. For some the multi-disciplinary focus of terrorism studies could go even further. Terrorism research could take great strides if and when we explore the application of paradigms in biological sciences and other areas outside of the political and social sciences.[[30]](#endnote-30) This interdisciplinary trajectory does not need to be solely in response to the needs and challenges of the intelligence community. Those short-term goals will only serve to stunt our progress.[[31]](#endnote-31) The interdisciplinary trajectory of terrorism studies is for the most part seen in a positive light. Yet Hegghammer proposes that interdisciplinarity is in fact ‘perpetuating the reputation problem’ by weakening the opportunity for terrorism researchers to get jobs within academia.[[32]](#endnote-32)

In the years that have passed since Sageman declared a ‘stagnation of terrorism research’ the collective review of the health of terrorism studies has persisted. Throughout this time, and even before, there has been a consensus that there are on-going challenges and problems relating to area. Where there have been disagreements these have related to the effect and magnitude of these challenges. Richard English, in contrast to Sageman, argued that the problems faced in the study of terrorism, be they relating to the conceptual, critical terrorism studies, or the stagnation debates, are not as concerning as many portrayed.[[33]](#endnote-33) What English does identify as more troubling is the disjointed nature of terrorism research, where we have become an area of research based around ‘unhelpful dichotomies and disjunctions.’ English identified five such dichotomies:

1. Pre-9/11 and post-9/11 researchers;
2. US based and non-US based scholars;
3. Case Study researchers and more ‘wide-angled’ researchers;
4. Field based and non-field based researchers;
5. Those who consider terrorism a symptom of more important issues and those who consider terrorism an issue in itself.

The issue with these is not that one end of the identified continua is superior to the other, it is that those on one end are not sufficiently engaged with the work of those on the opposite end. English proposes that the effect of this is the further stratification of an already siloed area of research.[[34]](#endnote-34)

**Present Study**

In their contribution to the stagnation debate Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko assert that the assessment of the collective health of terrorism research ‘is a subjective judgement in which different observers have different opinions.’[[35]](#endnote-35) This assertion provides the foundation for this article. In the immediate aftermath of Sageman’s original piece there was a series of individual and dual author responses published, many of which have been discussed above. These served the purpose of providing the ‘subjective judgement’ which McCauley and Moskalenko refer to.[[36]](#endnote-36) Since then researchers such as Schuurman[[37]](#endnote-37) and Silke and Schimdt-Petersen[[38]](#endnote-38) have provided a more objective review of the current health of the field as detailed earlier. The present study adds to this literature by providing a unique objective analysis of the subjective views of a sample of researchers from within terrorism studies. In doing so it embraces the need for subjective judgements, while simultaneously providing the reader with thematic focuses to bring these accounts together in a coherent and synthesised manner. It provides a qualitative analysis of the health of the field to complement the previous quantitative analyses by Schuurman,[[39]](#endnote-39) and Silke and Schmidt-Petersen[[40]](#endnote-40) and others, and the opinion-based analyses of Sageman,[[41]](#endnote-41) Hegghammer[[42]](#endnote-42) and others. This thematic analysis moves away from the reliance on single author opinion pieces while also presenting a more depth representation of opinion than the quantitative surveys on similar topics.

This is achieved through the analysis of interview data from the first series of the *Talking Terror* podcast. In September 2017 the Terrorism and Extremism Research Centre (TERC), at the University of East London, launched the *Talking Terror* podcast. The aim of this project was to introduce listeners to terrorism research, both past and present, in an easily accessible format.[[43]](#endnote-43) During the interviews the host asked participants about how they first became involved in this area. This was followed by a discussion about three pieces of research that influenced them, and then a discussion of their own research. The interviews concluded with a question about terrorism research in general. This was framed in one of two ways. Interviewees were either asked how they saw the health of terrorism research, or they were asked as to whether they believed that there was a stagnation in terrorism research.

In total 50 episodes of Season 1 of *Talking Terror* were recorded and aired (See Appendix A for full list of Series 1 interviewees). These interviews were recorded between August 2017 and June 2018. They were recorded via Skype or in person at the University of East London, or at the interviewees’ home institution. Individual episodes lasted approximately 1 hour. 43 of these episodes followed the format described above. A further five episodes were ‘special episodes’ focusing on a specific theme, or an individual with expertise based outside of academia. The remaining two episodes, with Tore Bjørgo and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, followed the previously described format. However, as there was not enough time left in the interviews, they were not asked the final question relating to their perception of the health of terrorism research. As the present article is focusing on experts’ perception of the health of terrorism research the sample consists of the 43 interviews that included a question, or discussion, relating to this topic.

Across the history of terrorism studies there are a number of celebrated works which have involved the author(s) canvassing the opinions of academic experts. This has included surveys and expert interviews. Surveys have included the seminal work by Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman in which they surveyed the opinion of terrorism researchers on the definition of terrorism. In 1985 they sent a questionnaire to approximately 200 members of the terrorism studies research community and received responses from 58.[[44]](#endnote-44) More recently Lee Jarvis and Stuart McDonald employed a similar approach to survey expert opinion on the definition of cyber-terrorism. In total they received 118 responses.[[45]](#endnote-45) Both of these surveys have made significant contributions to our understanding of the conceptualisation of terrorism with relatively small sample sizes.

The above cited works are excellent examples of surveys of experts within terrorism studies. However, the present research shares more in common with the work of scholars such as Lisa Stampnitzky. In her book *Disciplining Terror* Stampnitzky completed 32 semi-structured interviewed alongside her archival research. In this research she recruited interviewees based on their prominence in the development of terrorism studies. The judgement of this prominence was based on conference presentations, journal and book publications, and the results of Schmid and Jongman’s earlier survey.[[46]](#endnote-46) The present piece should not be considered a survey of terrorism expertise. It is a qualitative analysis of a series of interviews with terrorism and counter-terrorism studies experts. This approach therefore has different sampling and analytical requirements than the surveys mentioned above.

**Participant Information**

The sample generated for the *Talking Terror* podcast was a convenience sample. The interviewees contacted were a combination of those who were known to the interviewer personally, and those whose research the interviewer believed the listeners would be interested in. The sample was not originally developed for peer-reviewed academic publication. This should therefore not be considered a representative sample of terrorism researchers. Yet, this does not equate to the opinions analysed as lacking analytical value. As is noted below the sample includes interviewees from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds at different stages of their careers. It has been observed that the success of interview-based research, such as this, depends on the quality of the interviewees,[[47]](#endnote-47) rather than the number of people interviewed. Quality of terrorism studies expertise is difficult to measure objectively. However, one method available to measure the impact of an individual’s work is to assess the number of citations received.[[48]](#endnote-48) Of the 43 interviews analysed 33 have Google Scholar profiles. When assessing the total number of citations of this sample it shows that on average the interviewees have had a total of 2,673 citations in their career to date.[[49]](#endnote-49) This ranges from 172 to 9,494 total citations across the 33 interviewees at the time of writing.[[50]](#endnote-50) This signifies that the sample of interviewees have individually had significant impact on terrorism research.

Within terrorism and counter-terrorism studies one of the criteria used to differentiate researchers is whether or not they were active pre 9/11 or post 9/11. As all of the participants interviewed for the purpose of this research are still research active they can all be considered as being research active post 9/11. However, 15 participants were also research active pre 9/11. To be considered active pre-9/11 they must have completed their PhD prior to, or in, 2001. While not all participants’ research focuses on jihadist terrorism and/or extremism it is important to consider this ‘9/11’ variable as the area of terrorism studies has proliferated in the aftermath of this atrocity. This has become one of the key dichotomous categories differentiating modern day terrorism researchers.[[51]](#endnote-51)

In total there were 30 male participants and 13 female participants interviewed in the present sample. As Table 1 demonstrates this gender disparity was not as significant for the post 9/11 researchers as it was for the pre 9/11 researchers. However, there were still more male participants in each timeframe.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

When considering academic rank, close to half of all participants had reached full professorial level by the time of recording. However, it is acknowledged that some of the best research being carried out was by researchers who were less established.[[52]](#endnote-52) Therefore there was also a significant proportion of the participants who were Associate Professor level or below (see Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Silke discussed the dominance of political science and international relations in the study of terrorism.[[53]](#endnote-53) As Table 3 demonstrates this is still reflected in the sample developed for this podcast. This is apparent whether one focuses on the department in which an individual is working in at the time of recording, the discipline of their PhD, or their undergraduate discipline (both major and minor).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

These data demonstrate we must not solely focus on the department in which someone is currently working in when defining their disciplinary background or approach. Political science and international relations may still be the dominant disciplines employing academic experts of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies. That does not necessarily mean that all of these individuals are scholars of these disciplines by training. There are a wide variety of disciplinary influences at play within terrorism studies, not always apparent when one just focuses on departments offering courses in the area, or academics who research this area.

As has been noted elsewhere[[54]](#endnote-54) within terrorism studies there has been an over-emphasis on western approaches, and western-centric analyses. This very issue was raised by some of the interviewees in this podcast. It was noted by Jorge Lasmar that

…everything has a very Euro-centric or American-centric view on terrorism or counter-terrorism. I do think that we need to bring up non-western approaches and understand the regional diversities, the regional specificities both for terrorism studies and the practice and study of counter-terrorism.[[55]](#endnote-55)

This western focus is reflected in the countries of origin and the countries in which the *Talking Terror* interviewees were working. While we clearly need to continue to develop the western approaches to terrorism and counter-terrorism studies there is an ever-present need to promote and engage with non-western voices in the debates so as to get a more holistic understanding of the key issues in this area.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

This participant list reflects the UK and US dominance in terrorism studies. However, it does not reflect other regional strengths within terrorism studies, for example the high-quality research being carried out by Australian and Australia based researchers.

**Thematic Analysis**

In order to analyse each interviewees’ perspective on the health of terrorism studies each interview was listened to in full, to familiarise the author with the data. During this initial listening the specific sections of the interview relevant to this research question were isolated for future analysis. This was dominated by answers to the closing sections of the podcast. However, there were some interviewees who also focused on this issue within the rest of the main body of their interview. These sections were also included for the analysis. Each sub-section was then transcribed verbatim. The initial thematic coding of the transcripts followed. In total 104 individual codes were identified in this first coding phase. Through the next phase of analysis these initial codes were reassessed, with the re-analysis of the transcripts. As a result of this review the codes were reduced from 104 to 77. These 77 codes were themselves reassessed alongside the original transcripts, and in this process were grouped into five themes. These themes were then reviewed to assess their good fit with the uncoded and the coded data. At the end of this final stage of review the original five themes were reduced to four. The theme of *interdisciplinary research and researchers* was previously two sperate themes, which were merged in this final stage of the review process. The identified themes are defined below:

1. **Interdisciplinary Research and Researchers:** the theme *interdisciplinary research and researchers* captures discussions about the interdisciplinary evolution of terrorism research and the researchers partaking in this area of study.
2. **Data:** the theme *data* captures participants observations about the role which data plays in assessing the health of terrorism studies. This theme includes discussions of access to data, new data, primary sources, closed data and the quality of data.
3. **Applied Research:** the theme of *applied research* captures issues around the application of terrorism research in non-academic settings. This includes discussions as to whether terrorism research has a role to play in the development of policy or practice by governmental and non-governmental organisations in security, and beyond.
4. **Area/Field:** the final theme of *area/field* captures the debate around whether terrorism studies should be its own field, the influence of critical terrorism studies, and broad observations on the way terrorism research is currently structured as an area.

Within each of these themes one can see interviewees moving beyond issues raised in Sageman’s original ‘stagnation’ article, and issues around answering, ‘what leads a person to political violence?’[[56]](#endnote-56) This analysis therefore provides a broader assessment on the overall health of terrorism research. An overview of each theme, alongside a collection of systematically selected illustrative quotes, is presented below.

**Results**

***Interdisciplinary Research and Researchers***

In contrast to Sageman the *Talking Terror* interviewees were predominantly positive about the current health of terrorism research.There was widespread agreement about the interdisciplinary strength of terrorism studies today. This interdisciplinarity was seen as a mechanism by which recent research progress has been possible. Interviewees outlined that the scope of terrorism research now incorporates the work of researchers across a wider range of academic disciplines. Resultantly the methodological and analytical techniques have become more sophisticated, accelerating the process to a more developed understanding of key issues, a point emphasised by Orla Lynch.

I think that compared to 7 years ago that it’s in a fantastic place. If you go to conferences, if you hear PhD presentations the type of work that is being carried out is the type of work that was cried out for around the time of 7/7 and in the years afterwards. There’s a sophistication around the research. There is a use of methods that we haven’t seen in the past. So I really think that it’s very, very positive. We are starting to move towards an inter-disciplinarity, and I think that there is some very interesting, and I say this cautiously, some very interesting work between practitioners and academics. That needs to be managed very, very carefully. But I think that is a very beneficial move as well.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Richard Jackson noted how political science no longer has the disciplinary monopoly on the analysis of terrorism as it once did. We can now draw on a much wider variety of disciplines.

Overall I really think it has improved. I think in some ways there has been a pluralisation of the terrorism studies field. Obviously there are far more people doing terrorism studies these days. It’s not just critical terrorism studies. But the whole terrorism studies field has become a massive, and very broad based, and very inter-disciplinary kind of field. There’s very interesting research coming in from literature and literary studies, law, sociology, history, politics, so many different areas. I think that that has really helped to pluralise the field.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Gary LaFree expanded on this point by emphasising how disciplines outside of the humanities and social sciences are now making valuable contributions to our knowledge.

There has been a lot more interest in the past two decades from psychology, from criminology, even from political science, but also from areas that you wouldn’t think about immediately like computer science and mathematics.[[59]](#endnote-59)

While many pointed to contemporary interdisciplinarity, Joel Busher emphasised how across the history of terrorism research some of the most significant advances have come from our engagement with areas of research which may at first not seem obviously comparable.

You go back to people like Max Taylor’s work and that was enriched enormously by his work on sex offenders. If you look at the history of really good research on terrorism it’s always had those connections with other areas of research and long may it continue. I think that’s something that’s really positive.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Max Taylor, in his capacity as editor of *Terrorism and Political Violence,* raises concerns that in one of the area’s flagship journals the interdisciplinarity being extolled by others is not apparent.

I look at the material that comes into *Terrorism and Political Violence*. I edit it, and I see pretty much all the material that comes in. Very little is what you would describe as being, what you would call inter-disciplinary. An awful lot of it has a very clear discipline base. In terms of that journal it is political science. Because of that it misses things, and it is not as rich as it should be.[[61]](#endnote-61)

But for most interviewees there was a clear proliferation of interdisciplinary research. Part of the reason for this interdisciplinary success has come with the demystifying of terrorism as a ‘special problem.’ By recognising that terrorism is not something exceptional it provides us with greater opportunity to identify a much broader analogous body of knowledge than was previously addressed. The possibilities opened up by this were central to Noémie Bouhana’s assessment of contemporary terrorism studies.

I don't see terrorism as a special problem. I don't see radicalisation as a special problem. Radicalisation is a kind of socialisation. We know a lot, and we will know a lot more about radicalisation. It will not have the word ‘terrorism’ in it. But it will still be relevant. At the end of the day all the mechanisms will be general and shared a cross a whole bunch of problem domains…As long as we don’t put up barriers saying ‘this is not terrorism studies, let’s not look at it’ we’ll be fine.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Much of the interdisciplinary strength is credited to the new generation of researchers. They are seen to be developing our knowledge in ways that had not been considered previously. With a much larger proportion of academics dedicating their academic careers to the analysis of terrorism, and working together, the breadth of our knowledge is ever expanding. Julie Chernov-Hwang praises the collaborative engagement of this new generation.

I think we also have a clearer picture of who is doing really good work among the young scholars, and you [host] are having so many of them on your show and of the older generation of scholars. The work that is coming out it is so interesting, and it is building on each other, and having so many different people making connections with each other, and then working together on projects cross-continents, cross- universities. I think it is really exploding. I have such great hope and optimism for terrorism studies going forward.[[63]](#endnote-63)

This new generation are highly trained in research methods, and thus may soon be able to attempt to answer those questions once thought impenetrable, a point emphasised by James Piazza.

…there are a lot of excellent younger scholars coming into the field. You have a real generational effect of highly trained people seeing the terrorism field grow quite a bit and have received far better training than I have in terms of how to get at these questions from a research standpoint. I feel that our field is really going to take off quite a bit in the next 10 to 15 years. When these scholars hit their prime they are going to be doing really ground-breaking research, using research techniques that far surpass anything that you or I have ever done. There will be better quality data, more interesting data, bringing experiments into analysis which are going to be really, really great.[[64]](#endnote-64)

In their analysis these young researchers are now looking beyond the terrorist actors. They are also considering the communities from which the terrorists emerge. This range of analysis impressed Amarnath Amarasingam.

They [new generation of researchers] are going out into the field and talking to people, and thinking about it in different ways as well, not just talking to terrorists so to speak, talking to people around them in the communities they came out of, understanding the influences of the networks at play. I think they are getting creative about how to approach this issue.[[65]](#endnote-65)

In the opinion of John Horgan this new generation is not only able to advance and diversify our knowledge, they are also providing and updating those descriptive foundations which provide the necessary starting point for all of our academic scrutiny.

I think that I am both sympathetic to Sageman’s argument that on some issues we are stagnant. But on other issues the field is flourishing. There has been so much really good work in recent years. There has been some of the best work I have seen has come from people like Paul Gill and Emily Corner and Noémie Bouhana. These are researchers who really know what they are doing. On one level, not to unfairly characterise what they are doing it is basic descriptive work. That is the building block of solid, scientific, rigorous research on terrorism. I think we have gotten ourselves so locked into the process of trying to explain everything we have forgotten that the first step in any good science is describing what we are looking at.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Daniel Byman summed up the overall positivity about the new generation of terrorism researchers.

There has really been an amazing increase in the number of people who have been doing terrorism research, and also an exceptional number of skilled younger scholars, people who have mastered particular conflicts or particular regions and have an in-depth understanding. So compared to when I started studying this in the mid 1990’s it’s really night and day.[[67]](#endnote-67)

This overall sense of optimism is tempered, to a small degree, by a selection of interviewees warning of the presence of a number of ‘self-proclaimed experts’ whose contributions are not based on any form of academic rigour. They present ideological bias disguised as research, a point Sageman raises when proposing the stagnation of the area.[[68]](#endnote-68) For Laura Dugan this is the result of the fact that terrorism and political violence are issues which garner strong and divisive opinions outside of the terrorism research community.

I do think that there is some research out there that is more ideological…Because it is a topic that many people have strong opinions about, that aren’t researchers, I think that there is a temptation to cater to them and to get a lot of attention. And that’s dangerous. I read some things, that I’m not going to name that I think was more about…selling books than it was about doing a critical assessment of what is going on, which is a problem that I think we just have today in general, in many different areas.[[69]](#endnote-69)

James Forest outlined that with the presence of these ideologically biased outliers it is the responsibility of the older generation of scholars to ensure that the promising new generation of terrorism researchers are not negatively affected by their presence.

My only concern about the current state of research is that there seems to be a number of loud, relatively ignorant voices, who reject the value of this research, not based on its value but based on the fact that the research findings don’t support their narrow, bigoted political beliefs…I guess it’s up to us older folks, to make sure that we don’t let the new generation of scholars to lose hope that someday their contribution to this area of studies will be recognised and appreciated by policymakers.[[70]](#endnote-70)

Echoing Andrew Silke[[71]](#endnote-71) the once dominant issue of researcher transience was focused on by only five of the interviewees. In this they proposed that terrorism studies is still an area which attracts researchers for a short period of time, before moving on to other research areas. This is a point raised by Sarah Marsden and Neil Ferguson.

There is a strong body of researchers working consistently and persistently in this space. But I think that there are still transient researchers who come in from other fields and have got something to contribute, which they undoubtedly do. That’s not to say that I think that they shouldn’t be engaging with this work. But it’s a case of just ensuring that they are familiar, thoroughly familiar with the debates which exist within the field, because it does limit the development of the knowledge base. Essentially you are always engaging with debates that happened five years ago or whatever it might be. So I think that it doesn’t move the field forward as fast as it might do.[[72]](#endnote-72)

I think that it’s an area that tends to attract people for a short period of time, so it hinders the theoretical development.[[73]](#endnote-73)

As both Marsden and Ferguson emphasise if the area is dominated by transient researchers this is to the detriment of the continued development of our knowledge. However, while at one stage this issue was a significant concern for terrorism research[[74]](#endnote-74) the modern-day terrorism studies community is seen by many to have a moved towards a more consistent community of researchers, a point highlighted by Maura Conway.

I think that one of the criticisms, once upon a time, that a lot of people engaged in terrorism research were just engaged in it in a one-time way, that the publications were one-time publications, and what have you. So I think that it’s positive that more people seem to be in it for the longer term. They are sort of career terrorism researchers, if you like.[[75]](#endnote-75)

With the proliferation of terrorism research, and the expanding inter-disciplinarity we are cautioned not to lose sight of the foundational importance of theory to our research. Mia Bloom issues a word of warning about some of the terrorism research being published.

There is also a lot of work that is basically not much more than journalism. There isn’t this ability to step back and apply theoretical models, or at least connect it to existing disciplines, whether its in psychology, or in criminology, or in political science, whatever discipline you are, to connect it to something larger.[[76]](#endnote-76)

With the increased international focus on terrorism it can be tempting to try and make our research attractive to the media. But John Horgan cautions us that we must not lose sight of the fundamentals of academic research.

There seems to be this anxiety of influence in terrorism studies that you need to be seen to do something new, special, different, that nobody else has done. I get it. It’s attractive. It sells well. It makes for great media coverage. But at the end of the day there is no substitute for basic research, done well, theoretically informed and packaged nicely.[[77]](#endnote-77)

Across the theme of *interdisciplinary research and researchers* the analysis highlights an air of optimism. The new generation of well-trained inter-disciplinary researchers have the potential to significantly strengthen our understanding of terrorism. The area is no longer dominated by transient researchers. However, the optimism brought about by this new inter-disciplinary generation of researchers must not make us complacent. Research is not automatically stronger by the fact that it is inter-disciplinary. With the promise shown in contemporary terrorism studies it is critical that we make the most of this opportunity, by ensuring methodological and theoretical rigour whether this is inter-disciplinary research or not. Sarah Marsden sums this up by proposing that we are not necessarily making the best use of this inter-disciplinary impetus.

We are not making the best use of really robust inter-disciplinary work. You know inter-disciplinary work can be done really badly. But it can also be done really, really well in ways to help us to get better explanations, better frameworks. Just thinking about the radicalisation literature, so much of it is based on these disembodied risk factors which really are divorced from individual experience often, and divorced from wider theoretical accounts, which might help us contextualise and develop explanations that sit around them. So, although I think that there really is good research being done that cross over disciplines and brings to bear theory and method from other spaces that we can do much more in that regard.[[78]](#endnote-78)

When applying this methodological, analytical and theoretical rigour it is imperative to have an awareness of what our research can and, perhaps more importantly, cannot tell us. In his article Sageman proposes that the stagnation in terrorism research is the result of not being able to answer the ‘simple question of “what leads a person to turn to political violence?”’ [[79]](#endnote-79) By drawing on the low base-rate of terrorist actors, Paul Gill, pushes back against the assertion that this is an answerable question, let alone a ‘simple’ one.

I think that the question about prediction is quite narrow as well. You are never going to be able to predict such a low base-rate thing. What you might be able to do through better social science is say ‘okay you have 3,000 people of interest, you’ve only got finite resources to look at 5% what are the things that push people to the top of the list?’ You can do stuff on management and triage. But prediction? It’s kind of useless. Yeah there has been a stagnation in that answer, but because people within the field know that it’s a ridiculous question. So why are we even trying it in the first place?[[80]](#endnote-80)

What Gill presents, similar to Stern,[[81]](#endnote-81) is an illustration of the responsibility of academics to be able to honestly portray what is and is not possible with the methodologies, analytical techniques, data and the samples available to researchers. A mature and responsible academic community will not exaggerate the power of their approaches. They will present the limitations and the strengths of their research in equal measure. When developing research questions and hypotheses they must be worded so as to make them answerable and testable. It is irresponsible to present research questions which are impossible to address.

***Data***

Linked to the opening theme of *interdisciplinary research and researchers* is that of *data.* Interviewees regularly commented on the proliferation of new, higher quality data. For many this was seen as one of the most significant advances in terrorism research. In an area which for so long has partaken in collective handwringing about the dearth of quality data[[82]](#endnote-82) the corner is now being turned in the opinions of a significant proportion of the interviewees. In the opening episode of the series Andrew Silke engages with the question at the heart of Sageman’s stagnation argument. In doing so he contends that while we may not be able to answer, ‘what leads a person to political violence?’, that the data we now have access to has allowed us to get significantly closer to doing so in recent years.

So the type of question, for example. ‘who becomes a terrorist and why?’ Why does this person become radicalised when the person living next door going to the same school, exposed to the same environment? Why didn’t they join up but this person did join up? What’s the difference? The type of data that we have now to answer that question, or to provide insight into answering that question is getting better and better and is moving beyond the anecdote which we relied upon in previous decades.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Questions such as this are now able to be addressed in a more refined and sophisticated manner, as a result of the improved quality of the data. While extoling the improved quality of the data available interviewees were keen to outline that there remain some of the pre-existing limitations in relation to the data. This was a point emphasised by Sarah Marsden.

There is a growing evidence base. Whether that is Paul Gill’s work on lone actors, whether that is the work of foreign fighters that is coming out of Europe. There are increasingly solid pieces of work which are built on robust social science research, good evidence, and are critical and recognise the limits of what we are able to say at this stage. Nevertheless, the evidence base is growing and that is definitely a good thing.[[84]](#endnote-84)

One of the most noted data advances in recent years has been the abundance of high-quality terrorism studies databases. For Gary LaFree, one of the architects of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), this has been facilitated by the technological advances in automated data collection.

It is almost a revolution actually, in terms of what has gone on with automated data collection. I mentioned the GTD but START has actually 7 or 8 other databases like the GTD that have gotten way more automated over time.[[85]](#endnote-85)

This is a point echoed by LaFree’s colleague Laura Dugan. In reference to her research collaboration with Erica Chenoweth[[86]](#endnote-86) on Israeli counterterrorism she emphasises how further technological advances will allow us to gain access to a broader range of high-quality data in this and other areas of terrorism research.

One of my goals that began with the conversation with Erica [Chenoweth] back in 2007 or 2008 is to collect measures one what governments do, because we had such a one-sided assessment of what was happening, and we didn’t really understand what governments do in order to do that. We are making a lot of progress in that area, and with the advancement of computer technologies that will make it more efficient to collect these kinds of data.[[87]](#endnote-87)

However, even with these technological advances the databases can only ever give us a partial understanding of terrorism. In order to make the best use of the available databases it is imperative to be aware of what they can, and cannot, tell us about terrorism. Petter Nesser noted that:

I think we need more and better databases, at least to improve the quantitative studies that look at terrorism. I have experienced this myself when I used databases such as the Global Terrorism Database and things like that, when I have looked at that throughout my career. I see that it couldn't really help me at all when trying to understand and analyse and learn more about European jihadism. The phenomenon was almost non-existent in those databases because the incidents that were registered were almost only executed attacks. What I have tried to do in my work is try to build my own dataset and also include the thwarted plots, because if you look only at executed attacks you will not get a realistic idea of the threat level.[[88]](#endnote-88)

For years the discussions within the terrorism research community centred around the absence of data in research. Paul Gill illustrates how, in his experience, this has changed significantly.

Just as a very simple marker when me and you [host] were PhD students the first thing you would hear at conferences and so on, and in reviews in the literature, was ‘there was no data’, ‘there is no data’, ‘no data.’ Perspectives [on Terrorism] just published a little appendix in their latest journal where they listed something like 60 data sources for terrorism individuals. It’s thriving. So you don’t get questions anymore about lack of data. What you get questions about is inter-coder reliability, ‘what were your original sources?’ So even the questions you are being fielded are far more sophisticated. That's a massive leap in the small ten years that I have been engaged in it.[[89]](#endnote-89)

With these advances in data Andrew Silke argued that this will not change the topics we will be assessing. What will change is our ability to answer these questions in a refined manner.

I suspect that it will be still the same questions and issues that we are interested in 10 years from now. But the evidence base around it is going to become more and more refined and is going to become more granular in a way that up until now we haven’t been able to drill down to that level in the past. But increasingly we are becoming able to do that.[[90]](#endnote-90)

Alongside the discussion of the positive advances in relation to data, there were parallel discussions about the data-related issues terrorism researchers continue to face. This highlights the developments that still need to be made in order to develop our understanding of terrorist involvement even further. Somewhat echoing Sageman[[91]](#endnote-91) Max Taylor emphasised the issue of data access, and the effect it has on terrorism studies.

For a long time, I have felt that we actually know a great deal about terrorism, and we are not always able to access it, because a lot of information about terrorism is kept secret. It is not made public, and it is not shared. Sometimes there are good reasons for that, sometimes there aren’t good reasons for that. So a greater openness about sharing perhaps would be part of that agenda of breaking down barriers.[[92]](#endnote-92)

Within criminology one of the primary ways to advance understanding of criminal activity, and thus test and develop theories of criminality, is to interview prisoners convicted of relevant offences. However, for those wishing to interview terrorist prisoners access is more difficult. The security concerns surrounding these prisoners has resulted in Gary LaFree, and others, being left frustrated.

One of my personal frustrations, and this has been a problem more in the United States than in other parts of the world is getting access to prison populations. We had funding to do a project on the US Bureau of Prisons 7 or 8 years ago and we got all the way through the human subjects issues etc etc, and were eventually turned away. Since then I think a couple of other researchers, including John Horgan, were turned away by the US Bureau of Prisons. And so here in the federal system, I don't know exactly but we have something like 500 people serving time in US federal institutions for terrorism related charges. This would be a fantastically interesting group to have information from. Yet the government has so far not allowed that to happen. I think that's some low hanging fruit that I think we really need to do more to explore.[[93]](#endnote-93)

Bart Schuurman emphasised the view that without this kind of access that it will be exceptionally difficult to assess the validity of the theories being applied.

It is one of the reasons why it is so hard to empirically assess the many explanations that we have for involvement in terrorism. I mean like over 50 have been inventoried by Alex Schmid I believe. One of the issues there is that while they might all apply many of them are quite nuanced and theoretically complex, but without sufficient empirical data to assess their validity. Data not drawn from newspaper articles, but from primary sources of information. It’s going to remain really hard to move the debate forward on what actually brings people to involvement.[[94]](#endnote-94)

In response to the call by Sageman for greater data access Paul Gill notes that even with access to closed source data that the questions we continuously grapple with will not always be able to be answered.

He [Sageman] talks about lack of access to closed data. We have had access to closed data. Closed data is not perfect. It won’t even get you that ability to predict. It’s messy. It’s not been developed for research perspective. It’s not going to be developed like an easy glossy Excel file that you can manipulate straight away for research purposes. There is a lot of research that has used closed source. Bart Schuurman has a few papers on closed source, and there are a number of others who have done it too.[[95]](#endnote-95)

The majority of the *Talking Terror* interviewees were, to a large extent, more positive than Sageman[[96]](#endnote-96) in their assessment of terrorism research data. Most acknowledge the significant advances that have been made, while simultaneously noting the ongoing challenges faced in accessing high quality and analysable data.

***Applied Research***

While not as dominant as the other themes identified the issue of *applied research* was consistently discussed within the interviews. There was not consensus amongst participants as to how policy and practitioner-oriented terrorism research should be. As Erica Chenoweth points out this may in fact be reflective of terrorism research as an area.

I also think that there is a bit of a division between those who I think are more interested in policy work and those that are interested in the scholarship for its own sake.[[97]](#endnote-97)

This assertion is echoed by Aaron Winter.

If you read Sageman’s piece on stagnation, when I read it I think that he is only talking to a very small group of people on problem solving, policy-oriented research, because of who he is describing, what he is describing, but also the problems that we are supposed to figure out.[[98]](#endnote-98)

It is acknowledged that practitioner engagement is taking place, and for those who see this as desirable there is an assertion that this engagement and applicability of the research can go significantly further. Mary-Beth Altier and Erica Chenoweth addressed this in their interviews.

I do think where Sageman is a little bit correct is co-operation between practitioners, policy-makers and academics. I do see a fair amount of it. I see a lot of it. But I do think there is opportunity for more collaboration in that space. I don’t think that there’s none. I think that is a little overstated. But there’s certainly more opportunity to collaborate.[[99]](#endnote-99)

But I do think that decision-makers do hear us. I do think that the people who work in agencies who have to make decisions on a daily basis do read the research. I think that we need to keep moving forward.[[100]](#endnote-100)

Gary LaFree was not as optimistic as Altier or Chenoweth in relation to how much terrorism research has been listened to within policy circles.

If you go back to Marc’s essay on this theme, I think he had a much more optimistic view on how science informs policy, than perhaps is the reality. In my home field of criminology for example I think that we have had a huge impact on policy but it’s by no means a perfect one on one fit. Even if we were doing a far better job in understanding terrorism and reactions to terrorism than we are, I suspect politics is still politics and there is going to be a lot of ability of politicians and policy-makers to ignore what we see as the facts. But having said that I think that we have developed a much stronger understanding of causes and consequences of terrorism.[[101]](#endnote-101)

Max Taylor presented a view that without going further with our practitioner-engagement we are hindering the development of our knowledge, and the development of the area as a whole. He presented that this engagement should be with police, security services, and the agencies directly involved in the management of terrorism, rather than with politicians.

I don’t think that the study of terrorism is properly conducted as an academic exercise. It requires a practitioner engagement. By practitioner I don’t mean politician. I mean the people like the police, or security services or whatever, the other agencies that are involved in managing terrorism. I think that we need really to…I think that we need investment in a collective centre, institutional structure, or some similar thing that would help to break down the professional and discipline boundaries, which seems to me to be one of the reasons why we aren’t progressing in the way that we should.[[102]](#endnote-102)

While not dismissing this applicability of terrorism research outside of academia Neil Ferguson provided listeners with a note of caution.

I think that there is always that tension between the researcher and the practitioner. The practitioner wants a solution and the researcher will probably tell them that there is no one solution, it’s too complex, too difficult to pinpoint a silver bullet to it.[[103]](#endnote-103)

***Area/Field***

The final theme identified is that of *area/field*. Within this theme interviewees engaged in broad critical discussions about the current structure of terrorism studies. Paul Gill noted that Sageman[[104]](#endnote-104) unduly narrows the area when coming to the stagnation conclusion.

It opens up by saying that the only question that is really of interest is how do you predict who is going to become an Islamist terrorist or a jihadi terrorist, or whatever terminology you use. And to be fair that’s one of dozens and dozens of really important questions. So he unduly narrows the field.[[105]](#endnote-105)

This is a point similarly addressed by John Horgan.

He conceded that his view about stagnation in some way is a dissatisfaction with the failure to address the motivation issue. That’s fair enough but to characterise the whole field of terrorism studies as stagnant is missing the mark. It just needlessly fuels this sort of debate.[[106]](#endnote-106)

The narrowing of the field is not only the result of Sageman’s analysis. Invoking the late Paul Wilkinson, Sarah Marsden proposes that the narrowing of terrorism studies has come from overly focusing on the dominant terrorist threat of day.

I remember the late Paul Wilkinson, who was the editor of Terrorism and Political Violence for a long time, and he said…This was in the 1970s and 80s, and going into the 90s and he said ‘You know I would love to publish more on stuff that isn’t Ireland…that wasn’t based on the conflict in Ireland. But it just doesn’t come across my desk.’ I think now we are in a different time where I think the jihadi Salafism space is the most vibrant in terms of research. But I think that it neglects other areas.[[107]](#endnote-107)

As was referred to earlier in the article a further narrowing can be seen in the dearth of non-Western research being published. Agreeing with the sentiment posed by Jorge Lasmar[[108]](#endnote-108) Joel Busher calls on terrorism research to learn from the progress made by development studies and other analogous areas, by extending the scope of research beyond the current ‘western-centric’ focus.

One of the shifts that has happened there [in development studies] is breaking away from western-centric learning. This idea of the research happening here, even when it is about other places. A lot of the most innovative pieces of development studies research are based on practices, knowledge that have come outside of Europe and North America. I think that is something again for us to explore and how do we move beyond that western-centric understanding.[[109]](#endnote-109)

Javier Argomaniz proposes that the narrowing threat may also come from considering terrorism studies a field in its own right. Argomaniz believes that the progress in our understanding of terrorism has emerged from the analysis of terrorism from multiple disciplinary perspectives. This progress may be at risk of dissolving if terrorism studies is to act like an independent field in its own right.

I took a couple of steps back and tried to look at the field as it is at the moment…What I think is one of the dangers for the field in its current state is a specialisation. So we have seen this massive growth in recent years. But what I am concerned about is that we may eventually see terrorism studies become a field that is contained.[[110]](#endnote-110)

Alongside discussions of the narrowing of the area were observations relating to the fragmentation of terrorism studies. For some of the interviewees this fragmentation has resulted in unnecessary silos of researchers, failing and refusing to engage with each other’s’ research, a point raised by Amarnath Amarasingam specifically in relation to online communities.

Different groups are forming online, and they don’t talk to each other, and they don't like each other, yet we are all submitting to the same journals. I think that could be troubling going forward.[[111]](#endnote-111)

For Erica Chenoweth the fragmentation of the area has resulted in the inability of us as a research community to be able to provide a consensus narrative on the contributions of the collective research.

I think that we have more fragmentation than is necessary, and that an important way forward for us would be to really convene these different groups and talk about ‘what are we actually saying as a field?’ After all of this time, 20 years almost, of sustained resourcing and a huge explosion of work in this area with now lots of different silos and lots of different schools of thought. What is the collective story? What can we actually say as a community of researchers, and people who want to affect the world in a positive way, that has emerged out of this? We actually probably do have things that we could say. But it is too fragmented for all of us to be in the same room at the same time and come to some consensus.[[112]](#endnote-112)

This is most clearly exemplified by the recent emergence of critical terrorism studies (CTS). Richard Jackson, one of the founders of this division of terrorism studies, notes one of the key roles of CTS is to critique research which is purely focused on advising policymakers in the development of their counter-terrorism practices and policies.

I still think that there is probably, maybe geographically and intellectually, conservative places where traditional terrorism studies is still going on, which is focused primarily around providing advice to policymakers to better counter-terrorism. We can still critique a lot of that research as it refuses to really engage with political reasons, and the political grievances of why terrorists do what they do. It still focuses on using traditional notions of deterrence and the use of force to try and eliminate terrorists, and deal with the threat that way.[[113]](#endnote-113)

Ostensibly CTS has siloed the terrorism research even further. However, it is important to note that the contribution of CTS has been highlighted by those outside of the recognisable CTS silos as having made one of the most positive contributions to the current health of terrorism research. Laura Dugan in her assessment of modern-day terrorism research focused much of her praise on the recent contribution of CTS. For her CTS provides the space for area as a whole to assess our progress and chart a path forward for the area

Critical terrorism studies is an important area where people are coming together and really looking critically. It is actually assessing what are other terrorism researchers saying and what kinds of mistakes are we making. So we have a self-examination component of this kind of research. What kind of assumptions are we making and moving forward with without even investigating what we are saying. Are we just labelling everything terrorism without looking at what is going on?[[114]](#endnote-114)

John Horgan, who alongside Michael Boyle wrote *A case against ‘Critical Terrorism Studies’* (Horgan and Boyle, 2008),outlines that terrorism studies in the United States would benefit from ‘a dose of’ CTS. However, he warns that the emergence of CTS has created a false division within terrorism studies, which has created an unnecessary division with inaccurate labels.

I just don’t really see it [CTS] here in the US at all. We certainly could use a dose of it for sure. I think that the issue that I had with Critical Terrorism Studies, and there are a lot of people there who I admire and respect personally and professionally. Some of them see me as this ‘bogeyman’ as I wrote that piece with Mike Boyle. I think my problem was, my reservation was ‘why are you setting yourselves up as something separate or distinct from the rest of us? Your concerns about abuses, your concerns about the field, your concerns about progress, and stagnation, and development, and all of that. We share those same viewpoints.’ But this false dichotomy of critical versus…what am I then? Am I an uncritical terrorism researcher? I then heard this phrase being used, well we are the ‘orthodoxy.’ Well God Almighty! That drove me bananas and I thought ‘listen as an academic I get the importance of this intellectual reflection but for you to inadvertently characterise the rest of us as not engaging in this is false.’ I think for years I sort of never forgave them for that. It’s false advertising to say that we don’t do it. Well if you look hard enough, we actually do.[[115]](#endnote-115)

This final theme of *area/field* demonstrates that while interviewees have been enthusiastic about individual researchers and their outputs they see that as a community there is still work to be done if we are to be able to embrace the opportunity provided to us by the influx of new interdisciplinary researchers and data.

**Discussion**

In the years which have passed since Marc Sageman provocatively proposed that terrorism studies had ‘stagnated’ the terrorism research community has engaged in constructive reflection on the value and direction of the research.[[116]](#endnote-116) The *Talking Terror* podcast provided one of many outlets for this reflection to take place. Throughout the podcast contributors, and listeners, were provided the opportunity to consider the past, present and future of the area. The discussions went beyond the narrow focus of Sageman’s original article, thus reflecting the need for a broader debate on the health of the area.

On first reading it may appear that Sageman was presenting an argument that international terrorism research in its entirety is in a state of stagnation.[[117]](#endnote-117) What he was actually arguing is that there has been an inability of US scholars, in collaboration with the government and the intelligence community, to answer the question ‘what leads a person to political violence?’ This blinkered view of terrorism research was dismissive of the range of questions which need to be, and are being, addressed by scholars around the globe. While understanding what leads a person to terrorism is one of the fundamental questions of the area there are so many more which we need to be asking in parallel to this, if we are to drive this area of research forward. The analysis presented in this paper points to the great opportunities which we, as a research community, have to expand and develop terrorism studies even further. It shows that any assessment of the health of the area needs to move beyond our ability to answer one fundamental question, in one region.

The surge of highly trained interdisciplinary researchers, coupled with greater access to data, provides us with the chance to address the questions and test the hypotheses which were once thought out of reach. With this comes the space for both policy focused, and non-policy focused research. But with these opportunities come responsibilities. We cannot become complacent on the need for academic rigour to coincide with this proliferation of research. As a number of the interviewees outlined central to this must be a respect for both theory and methods. Interdisciplinary and data-driven research are not synonymous to high quality-research. At the most fundamental level we need to be striving for theoretically, methodologically and analytically superior research. These goals should supersede any desire for non-academic research impact or interdisciplinarity for the interdisciplinarity’s sake.

If terrorism studies is to be a space for interdisciplinary engagement, as Youngman suggested, [[118]](#endnote-118) this must be an interdisciplinary space based on the clear understanding of what true interdisciplinary research should consist of, and what it can achieve. By appropriately embracing the possibilities of this interdisciplinary space our knowledge can continue to expand. We can embrace the possibilities of learning from our own home disciplines as Hegghammer recommends while simultaneously engaging in cross-disciplinary exchange where it is more appropriate to do so.[[119]](#endnote-119) For this space to be as fruitful as possible researchers should continue to critically consider the roles of *interdisciplinary research and researchers, data, applied research*, and the overall, *area/field*. The advancement of terrorism research must also continue to embrace the tradition of critical collective review. It is only through these periods of review that we can assess the progress made and establish a roadmap for future research advancements.

Through the thematic analysis of 43 interviews with terrorism studies experts the present article has sought to provide an analysis of the overall health of terrorism research. This should be neither considered a representative sample of researchers, nor a survey of the field. Therefore, as with the original responses in the ‘stagnation debate’ published in the pages of this journal, this analysis should not be considered representative of the field as a whole, even though it has attempted to broaden out the debate. To achieve this representative assessment a more systematic approach is required, utilising alternative sampling strategies and research methodologies. This would need to include broader representation of terrorism studies scholars from the global south, scholars who are too often the unheard voices of our area. There needs to be more attention paid to their perspectives to get a truly representative understanding of the health of our area, and to advance our understanding of terrorism in general. The gender imbalance for interviewees needs to be similarly addressed. Terrorism studies has come a long way from male-dominated debates. This therefore must to be reflected in any future sample for a similar form of research. Similarly there is a continued need for this heterogeneity of terrorism scholars to be reflected in journals such as this, and podcasts such as *Talking Terror,* when seeking responses to provocative pieces such as Sageman’s.[[120]](#endnote-120) We cannot, and should not, be reliant on the viewpoints of a select few. We need to consider the views and experiences of the wider terrorism studies population. This article has attempted to address this somewhat, but there is still a long way to go.

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8. Sageman (2014) “Stagnation” (see note 1) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, p.576 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Valid as of May 15th, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. M. Taylor. “If I Were You, I Wouldn't Start From Here: Response to Marc Sageman’s “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research.””, *Terrorism and Political Violence,* 26(4) (2014): 581-586 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. T. Hegghammer. *The Future of Terrorism Studies.* Talk at *Intelligence, National Security, and War.* (Naval War College, RI, 2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Schuurman “Research on Terrorism” (see note 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Taylor “If I Were You” (see note 12). P.582 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. J. Horgan and J. Stern “Terrorism Research Has Not Stagnated.” (2013) *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
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30. M. Taylor (see note 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
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     **INSERT APPENDIX A** [↑](#endnote-ref-120)