# Author’s affiliation

## Research independence

The author has a leave of absent from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security (hereafter the Ministry) to do research in part presented in this article. The Ministry is partly financing the research, in part it is financed by the Norwegian Research Council. The Ministry is also an actor in the case under study, in the early phase of the process.

The author and the Ministry have an agreement of scientific independence in line with relevant laws and ethical guidelines. This implies that the researcher is obliged to comply with [The Act on ethics and integrity in research](https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2017-04-28-23) and [Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology](https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/), which specifies that researchers are responsible for preserving the freedom and independence of research (§4, A1) and obliged to comply with recognised norms of research ethics (A2). The agreement also specifies that the Ministry cannot instruct any part of the scientific process.

The author has not been involved in any of the processes studied, and started to work in the Ministry in 2013, three years after the Ministry had a role in the case under study. The research does not build on information acquired by the author as a civil servant and is thus not subject to her Duty of confidentiality agreement. The research material (archive material, interview appointments) has been acquired following regular procedures and rules pertaining to public access.

The author’s background as a civil servant in the relevant Ministry clearly has methodological and ethical implications. As the aim of the text below is in part reflexivity, it is written in a personal tone.

## Author’s background

I am a political scientist from University of Bergen and Freie Universität, Berlin, with approximately 18 years work experience as a civil servant, and a few years as a university lecturer. I am on a leave of absent from the Department of Public Security within the Ministry, working in a section responsible for Analysis, Strategic Planning and Audits. Questions of civil-military coordination and of risk assessment are part of the Departments responsibility, and I have occasionally been involved in work pertaining to such subjects. As such, I became aware of the controversy on the security-risk assessment standard.

## Methodological considerations

A civil servant background has given me knowledge of clear advantage when it comes to data production, such as easing the search for, and acquiring of, relevant information (archives, public documents). The response to interview requests has been almost exclusively positive. The challenge of understanding context and norms, and of communicating well when interviewing professional elites are often noted by scholars (Goldman and Swayze 2012; Odendahl and Shaw 2012). My in-depth knowledge both factually and when it comes to the cultural codes of the Norwegian civil service, gave me a good platform from which to interview. This has most likely enabled me to pursue issues more thoroughly than without such background (Coar and Sim 2006).

Coming from a Ministry may, however, also negatively impact the interview situation.

The interviewee stated, right before the interview started, something close to: ‘Well, I can say everything to you. You know what can be used [stated in public] and what cannot.’ I replied that I was interviewing him/her in the role as a researcher [not in the role of a public servant], and that (s)he should consider it in that way and answer accordingly. (S)he answered something like ‘you know what I mean’ and I did not stress it further and started the interview (Memo after interview).

The interviewee’s statement contains a willingness to be open and, we may assume, also more honest, when the interviewer is a civil servant. I was given the role of the guardian, so that (s)he could be open. The line between the interviewee and the interviewed was thus “moved.” I should not only take into account the responsibility as a researcher interviewing, I was also expected to take responsibility as a civil servant; not using information that “we both knew” should not be made public.

This has not been too difficult, as the study has not been directed towards detailed information of a sensitive kind. The statement exemplifies; however, that my connection to the Ministry is part of the premise of the study, influencing the (co-creation of) interview data. Especially for those coming from an agency or outside the government, my background might create a perceived asymmetry. If it is the Ministry interviewing you, the answers may become important. For some, my affiliation with the Ministry increased what was at stake, I sensed, with a corresponding urge for persuasion or positive representation. For others, my background seemed to decrease the need to convince. I am perceived as “one of them,” they could relax, decreasing the need to “perform.”

To deal with the challenges described above, I have used several types of triangulation (Natow 2020). When possible, I triangulate with other types of data (documents, conference recording etc.). The first empirical phase, which took place inside the government, was especially challenging, because of the time passed, the high level of conflict, and where the Ministry did play a role. Fortunately, archive material with letters, memos etc. exist, and has been a valuable remnant source of information (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). Interviewing enough people, and with different perspectives, has also been a strategy to obtain a richer and more nuanced picture.

A Ministry is a political institution with power and a political agenda, legitimizing conduct through acting on behalf of the Minister and the elected government. A legitimate question is thus if a civil servant from a Ministry can do trustworthy research. A few points should be noted.

I am not doing research as a civil servant. I have a leave from the position in the Ministry and act independent of the Ministry. In all my encountering with interviewees and others, I make my background, but also my agreed upon independence, clear. To some extent, at least, declaring independence facilitates independence.

A key step to secure an ethical and methodological viable research was done before the research started, when choosing the case and research questions. A key criterion was that the project would not need a critical investigation into the Ministry’s conduct, and the Ministry should not have a political agenda pertaining to the case. The Ministry did have an agenda in the first phase of the case study, but it was limited and straight forward: to get one, unified guideline published. I saw this as so modest and non-political, that I could critically examine the case.

A conceptual blindness (Coar and Sim 2006) and a lack of analytical distance may occur when a person from public administration does research on public administration. This potential bias remains, but I have tried to rely on the tools and perspectives established in academia, and use them as a basis for conduct, as well as critically reflect on the process.

The key strategy for achieving analytical distance has been to engage with relevant academic literature, especially of a theoretical kind, as well as through applying tools and principles from qualitative methods. It is the combination of sensitizing my investigation through theoretical encountering, as well as systematic coding and analysis, which hopefully has created a distance to my tacit and taken-for-granted knowledge as a public servant. Key is also my affiliation to the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo. I actively draw on their staff and others within academia, to reflect and criticize my conduct and interpretations.

References

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