

Chapter 2

Researching Religion and Violence

Reflections on Symbolic Interactionism and Fieldwork

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In collaboration with Pan-African Strategic and Policy Research Group (PANAFSTRAG), the Sociology of Religion Research Committee (RC22) of the International Sociological Association, held their Mid-Term International Conference from January 27 to January 30, 2012, in Abuja, Nigeria. The theme of the Conference was “Religion, Conflict, Violence, and Tolerance in Global Perspectives.” Roughly fifty scholars and observers assembled in this modern African city from a diverse cross-section of the globe, including France, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Serbia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, and Zimbabwe. Their range of vantage points and fields of study proved to be just as diverse, with participants bringing expertise in anthropology, historiography, jurisprudence, political science, public policy, and sociology.

The function of the Conference was to provide a cross-disciplinary platform of discourse, focused upon the intersections of conflict, violence, and tolerance within various religious traditions and historical epochs. As conventional explanations have been largely insufficient in both grasping local-global complexities and providing a comprehensive framework to approach and analyze the empirical social world, the conference was organized in order to foster attention and further analysis into a popular, yet often misunderstood field of study.

THE ABUJA CONFERENCE

The decision and determination to host the Conference in Abuja was bold and timely. It required scholars who were willing to get beyond the sensational and frequently violent headlines to engage in serious discussion in the

midst of a nation in flux. Nigeria is situated geographically in West Africa, just below the fringe of the Sahara Desert, and occupies an informal boundary marker between the majority Muslim population of northern Africa and the majority Christian population of sub-Saharan Africa. While African Indigenous Religions are still ritually active, both formally and informally, and over 250 different ethnolinguistic groups inhabit Nigeria, most of the country's almost 200 million people are evenly split between those claiming to be Muslim or Christian.¹ Thus, Nigeria provides one of only a few examples, and certainly the largest example, of a nation with a relatively even proportion of Muslims and Christians. Given this segmentation and considering the size of the population, Nigeria is a major bastion for both Muslim and Christian dominion, causing many to see it as "the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world," and offering the potential to serve as a microcosmic litmus test for better understanding interreligious encounter and the role that religion plays in Africa and beyond.²

The papers presented at the conference were fascinating. While some focused upon specific and detailed cases of conflict or tolerance, others delivered a bold and comprehensive analysis of broader historical and theoretical approaches. The unintentional, yet timely focus on Nigeria constructed a web of conversation linking together seemingly unrelated events and people. Pragmatic and theoretical methods emerged during many of the presentations that crossed boundaries of culture, geography, and field of study.

The purpose and setting is important to point out because the cross-disciplinary, globally representative nature resulted in a unique reflection upon how far our current methodological approaches take us in understanding what is often termed "religious" violence. In the case of this chapter, it attempts to reenter an old method, Symbolic Interactionism, with the hopes of stimulating some very practical methodological reflections on social scientific fieldwork, and more broadly within the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human societies.³ This chapter will first of all review the basic premises and ideas of Symbolic Interactionism before moving onto a series of methodological reflections. These reflections on the nature of social interaction and culture and make the case for more empirical, qualitative research on religion and violence. Finally, it argues that the application of the term "religious" to acts of violence is merely the beginning, not the end of social scientific analysis and understanding.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM: BASIC PREMISES

While the intellectual foundation of Symbolic Interactionism can be found in scholars as varied as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey and William

James, the modern method was developed by Herbert Blumer. Blumer was an American sociologist who initially taught at the University of Chicago with an acute interest in social psychologist George Herbert Meade, and later went on to develop the sociology program at the University of California, Berkeley. The same year he moved to Berkeley, 1952, was also the year he became the president of the American Sociological Association, from which association he also received the award for a Career of Distinguished Scholarship in 1983, just a few years before his death in 1987.

Blumer's method rests upon three basis premises. The first being that "Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things."⁴ Or stated slightly differently: people act toward objects on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them. This premise is built upon the idea that the world is made up of symbolic objects. Now, "an object is anything that can be indicated or referred to."⁵ For instance, anything from physical objects, like the laptop I am typing on or the chair I am sitting in; to categories of social objects and relationships, such as a mother, a tribal leader, a student, or an enemy; institutional objects, like a hotel establishment or a government agency; and even abstract ideals and actions, such as honesty, democracy, and penitence.

Relatedly, the second premise states: "The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows."⁶ Put simply, the meaning of any symbol is its relationship with other symbols. Practically speaking, the chair that I am sitting on has a very close relationship with what? Well, the floor, and the foundation of the building, the dirt, and so on and so forth. The same applies to all other forms of objects as well, and this is where what Clifford Geertz called "local knowledge" is of incredible importance, because the same objects can and do relate to other objects in different ways depending on the context, which affects how local subjects see and perceive objects.⁷ Thus, when analyzing symbols and concrete experiences of individual and group life, it is critical to not only focus on what appear to be central meanings, likely seen as central because you think you have seen it before, but to seek out with fresh eyes and discover the various ways these meanings relate to and interact contextually with other symbols.

The third premise follows: "These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters."⁸ As meaning is understood to be a constantly evolving social product, it cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships or universal social processes. Instead, the use of meanings and actions occur through a process of interactive interpretation and are continually constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, on the basis of people's interpretations of the situations they are in and the symbols they interact with. Connected to

this third premise is the rejection of philosophical realism—that meaning is intrinsically imbibed in symbols, and a rejection of psychical accretion—that meaning merely arises through a coalescence of psychological elements in the person. While symbols and their psychical interpretations certainly possess pragmatic features that lead to cultural trends and typical responses, there is no internal objective makeup, no prelodged, or established meanings.

“The nature of an object—of any and every object—consists of the meaning that it has for the person for whom it is an object,” Blumer writes, and thus we can understand how objects have different meanings for different individuals.⁹ As Blumer goes on to say, “A tree will be a different object to a botanist, a lumberman, a poet, and a home gardener; the President . . . can be a very different object to a devoted member of his [or her] political party than to a member of the opposition.”¹⁰ And even within the same categories of social position or social roles, the same object can be interpreted in a wildly diverse fashion. This is a result of meanings being social products, created and formed on a continual basis in and through the defining activities of people as they interact contextually with the world around them. Ultimately, “it follows that in order to understand the actions and motivations of people, it is necessary to identify as closely as possible their world of objects.”¹¹

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM: ROOT IMAGES

Linked to these methodological premises is a number of what Blumer refers to as “root images”—basic ideas which philosophically ground the perspective of symbolic interactionism; two of which are important for the reflections that follow this section. The first idea relates to the nature of human group life: individuals and groups exist in action and must be researched empirically. As Blumer remarks:

Conceptual schemes that depict society in some other fashion can only be derivatives of the complex of ongoing activity that constitutes group life. For example, this is certainly true of two dominant conceptions of society in contemporary sociology—that of culture and that of social structure. Culture as a conception, whether defined as custom, tradition, norm, value, rules, or such like, is clearly derived from what people do. Similarly, social structure in any of its aspects, as represented by such terms as social position, status, role, authority, and prestige, refers to relationships derived from how people act toward each other.¹²

The point being for our purposes is that given that any conceptualization of individual or group life is based upon action, empirical data collection related to group activities is necessary.

The second idea relates to the nature of human interaction: social interaction is influenced by and influences human actions. Rather than merely being the setting for predisposed actions, social interaction influences actions. As Blumer states:

Put simply, human beings in interacting with one another have to take account of what each other is doing or is about to do; they are forced to direct their own conduct or handle their situations in terms of what they take into account. Thus, the activities of others enters as positive factors in the formation of their own conduct; in the face of the actions of others one may abandon an intention or purpose, revise it, check or suspend it, intensify it, or replace it. The actions of others enter to set what one plans to do, may oppose or prevent such plans, may require a revision of such plans, and may demand a very different set of such plans. One has to *fit* one's own line of activity in some manner to the actions of others. The actions of others have to be taken into account and cannot be regarded as merely an arena for the expression of what one is disposed to do or sets out to do.¹³

Just the same, this interactive process has a history, a precedence in which interactions arise from, known as vertical interaction. Social interaction always emerges out of and is connected with a context of previous action. It cannot be understood apart from this context.

RESEARCHING RELIGION AND VIOLENCE: REFLECTIONS

With a basic understanding of Symbolic Interactionism, the remainder of the chapter will offer a series of reflections on how this method can and should apply when researching religion and violence.

The Group without a Face

Given recent events in Nigeria, the quasi-religiopolitical group popularly known as Boko Haram, was a frequent topic of discussion at the conference in Abuja.¹⁴ Yet, despite being commonplace in our academic sessions and forming the centerpiece of the daily news headlines during the conference, a realization was made: there has been relatively no serious social scientific study and analysis of the group.¹⁵ It is not that this group or others like it do not have a face; it is rather that hardly anyone has taken the time and effort to catch a glimpse.

As an imperative, the use of the social scientific approach, from whatever angle or field of study, implies the direct observation of and analysis of the empirical social world. Regardless, what is more common than not, especially in relation to the study of groups like Boko Haram, is an approach rooted in a

speculative arrangement of secondary journalist material and images spliced out of context from social and mass media. This narrow restriction often leads to a gross misinterpretation of the complexities found on the ground (i.e., in the lived world).

Of course, researching social violence is indeed difficult and sometimes even dangerous, but being in the field comes with the territory and is necessary to be qualified as social science. This issue calls for what anthropologist Lynn Hirshkind once termed the return of the field to fieldwork; a return in which the scholar is not only literally present in the field but able to express sensitivity to the nuances and distinctiveness of the local.¹⁶ As Clifford Geertz stressed in his classic work, *Islam Observed*, “there is no route to general knowledge save through a dense thicket of particulars.”¹⁷ To date these particulars as they relate to many supposedly violent religious individuals and groups have yet to be explored. The academic approach to groups such as Boko Haram needs to be reimagined and cleansed of its convenient association with shoddy journalism. While it is tempting in the midst of a seemingly chaotic situation to make quick public policy decisions, scholars need to take a measured approach based upon what is actually known.

The Contemporary Is Rooted in Vertical Interaction

In order to understand the particulars of any religiopolitical group, scholars must recognize the role of historical precedence. All contemporary interactions are rooted in and arise out of vertical interaction. How a group defines itself and takes action in the present is connected to the past and cannot be understood apart from this context of previous action. As the sociologist Herbert Blumer makes clear, “One is on treacherous and empirically invalid grounds if he thinks that any given form of action can be sliced off from its historical linkage, as if its makeup and character arose out of the air through spontaneous generation instead of growing out of what went before.”¹⁸ As a note, this is not to say that individuals or groups cannot and do not take actions that are markedly different from previous actions. However, even in such cases, there is always some connection and historical linkage.

Once again, using the example of Boko Haram, while this group seems to have emerged around 2001, there is undoubtedly a backstory yet to be fully discovered.

The Role of Phenomenology

While social scientists are not strictly guided by the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology, in order to understand the actions and motivations

of any individual or group, one has to see objects as they see them and get inside their defining process of meaning and experience. In approaching this process, there is an assumption that the reality perceived is the most important reality. While this access and understanding is inherently limited, Bronislaw Malinowski's words are still relevant here: "The final goal . . . is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world."¹⁹ While Malinowski's positivist approach has been thoroughly critiqued, with doubts of whether it is possible to "grasp the native's point of view," the goal remains, at least as an attempt, as an intended purpose, to get as close as possible. As Blumer himself remarked: "One has to get inside of the defining process of the actor in order to understand actions and motivations."²⁰

Using a phenomenological approach is perhaps indispensable when researching delicate topics such as religiopolitical violence and terrorism. Performing *epochè* allows the scholar to suspend one's own judgments and analysis as far as possible, in order to first understand, describe, and explain the social phenomena from the perspective of the actors involved.²¹ As James L. Cox rightly asserts of this process: "What is important for the phenomenologist of religion is not what is true, but the attainment of understanding and an accurate description of what the adherent believes to be true."²² This dispassionate, analytical focus on the perceived reality and an interest in the experiences and motivations of those involved will undoubtedly lead to better access and provide a clearer glimpse into the lived world.²³

The Role of the Qualitative Approach

Speaking specifically of survey research, the scope of this quantitative method, although often dealing with a broad base of knowledge, is narrowly limited to extracting data that is neatly quantifiable and easily insertable into tables and graphs, and thus, tends to concentrate upon "what" people say they do or believe. As such, this approach seldom offers a clear indication of life lived.²⁴ These surveys might, for instance, reveal whether a participant has encountered a positive or negative interreligious experience, but a calculable survey can tell us very little regarding the complex dimensions of the issue or the intricate nature of the subjects' underlying thoughts.²⁵ As grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz points out, "Researchers who use elicited texts cannot modify or reword a question once they ask it. Nor do they have any immediate possibility of following up on a statement, encouraging a response, or raising a question."²⁶ In other words, a *strictly* quantitative approach keeps the data on the surface level of understanding the phenomena under study and will likely lead to "tourist interviewing," or what Pierre Bourdieu termed as "tape recorder sociologies," which are characterized by brief conversations with

participants that are barely known by the researcher.²⁷ Indeed, how can you quantify a social group if you don't understand and know which questions are relevant?

This type of data gathering leads to a related point: When concrete questions are used, regardless of changing circumstances or theories developed in the field, the data easily becomes formed and locked into conceptual categories that lack phenomenological awareness.²⁸ For while quantitative research is often touted as possessing a type of objectivism, with its canonized research procedures and mathematical protocols, when applied to the messy chaos of the lived world, these a priori models inevitably fall short, leaving scholars with the need to fill in the gaps, but lacking adequate data to do so. Thus, the interpretation, instead of being rooted in the experience of social life under study, commits what Herbert Blumer termed the “worst kind of subjectivism,” by basing its understanding within the life of the scholar and replacing the lived experience of the empirical world with social philosophizing and empirically detached logic.²⁹

Furthermore, it is critical to note that using concrete questions does not mean that all participants will interpret their meaning in the same way. As the famous biologist Alfred C. Kinsey once noted:

Standardized questions do not bring standardized answers, for the same question means different things to different people. In order to have questions mean the same thing to different people, they must be modified to fit the vocabulary, the educational background, and the comprehension of each subject.³⁰

This is especially the case when it comes to extrapolating the details of someone's experience of the world. Questions that fail to contextualize and adapt to each participant's lived world are again guilty of Blumer's charge of subjectivism. And while qualitative studies are certainly never fully objective, they in most cases are more appropriately situated to provide an *initial gateway* for the contextual analysis of social life.

The Nature of Culture

Cultures exist only in bricolaged form. Thus, a social scientist, while perhaps specializing in the interplay between religion and violence, must be aware of the broader social web in which these objects exist. This is where what Clifford Geertz termed “local knowledge” becomes incredibly important, as objects can and do relate to other objects in different ways depending on the localization of these objects.³¹ In the lived world, people do not exist in segmented realities, with actions compartmentalized inside the bounds of proper

social categories. People are everything they are. There are no imbibed, ideal, or true forms. There is only what is—what exists in the empirical social world.

This existence is porous and under constant revision. Hierarchies of identity, whether consciously or unconsciously, are adapted within horizontal and vertical interaction. In other words, interaction with others and the progress of time affect the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of an individual or group. No one and no group are able to remain static. With this admission in mind, the scholar is better able to understand the fullness of social life and change. Long established ideologies can be challenged, romanticized visions of a group can be demystified, and sensationalized reports can be viewed more comprehensively.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Religiopolitical symbols are visibly manifested across the landscapes and mindsets of societies around the globe. Yet, despite these observable qualities, the meanings and motivations behind these symbols are intricately woven into the enigmatic fabric of a society's chaotic and heterogeneous cultural milieu. Every case holds a nuanced relationship with both local and global influences, constantly alternating between pattern and redesign. This is the type of field that exists for the social scientist. These reflections, while not offering full resolve, contribute to an ongoing discourse in how to best approach the empirical social world—in this case, the application of the term “religious” to acts of violence is merely the beginning, not the end of social scientific analysis and understanding. Given the nuance and complexity of all forms of social violence, Blumer's method of symbolic interactionism provides a clearer gateway to defining the multiple levels of interpersonal and institutional interaction and encompasses the full range of economic, ethnic, civil, class, gender, age, political, and geographical dynamics.

NOTES

1. For more on the complicated religious statistics in Nigeria and the phenomena of individuals with multiple religious belongings and identities, see my forthcoming chapter: “Multiple Religious Belonging and Identity in Contemporary Nigeria: Methodological Reflections for World Christianity,” in *World Christianity: Methodological Considerations*, eds. Martha Frederiks and Dorottya Nagy (Leiden: Brill, 2020). See also: Corey L. Williams, “Chrislam, Accommodation, and the

Politics of Religious *Bricolage* in Contemporary Nigeria,” *Studies in World Christianity* 24, no. 3 (2019): 5–28.

2. This commonly referred to phrase was originally coined by Archbishop Teissier of Algiers and is quoted in: J. Onaiyekan, “Being the Church in an Islamo-Christian Society: A Nigerian Perspective,” in *Towards an African Synod*, eds. G. Albergo and A. Mushete (London: SCM Press, 1992), 48.

3. It is recognized that Symbolic Interactionism has been critiqued over the past decades. However, this chapter hopes to salvage the method for the sake of moving the conversation forward.

4. Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986), 2.

5. *Ibid*, 11.

6. *Ibid*, 2.

7. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

8. *Ibid*, 2.

9. *Ibid*, 11.

10. *Ibid*.

11. *Ibid*.

12. *Ibid*, 6, 7.

13. *Ibid*, 8.

14. The name Boko Haram is of Hausa origin and roughly translated means: western education is forbidden or sinful. This is the name given to them by local residents in Maiduguri, Nigeria, the spiritual center and headquarters of the group. The official name, however, is *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*, an Arabic slogan meaning “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad.”

15. Since the Abuja conference in 2012, there have been a number of excellent empirical studies released that redress this criticism to a certain degree. These include: Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria’s Islamist Insurgency* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015); Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (London: Zed Books, 2017); and Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

16. Lynn Hirschkind, “Redefining the ‘Field’ in Fieldwork,” *Ethnology* 30, no. 3 (1991): 237–249.

17. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 22.

18. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 20.

19. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1922), 25. While Malinowski’s terminology is perhaps outdated, his phenomenological approach remains grounded in contemporary ethnography.

20. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 16.

21. For an extended discussion of the stages of the phenomenological method, see: James L. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London:

Continuum Publishing, 2006), 48–72. As Cox states: “A central problem for the study of religion is how the subjective observer gains knowledge of an objective entity when that objective entity (religious life and practice) is embodied in subjective experience . . . even though the observer endeavors to suspend all previous judgements, this is impossible in the literal sense . . . *epochè* cannot be practised perfectly and is best understood as a self-reflexive attitude” (50–52).

22. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology*, 56.

23. James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 34. In this critical work, Spradley offers a brief description of the disposition required for this type of approach: “I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?” See also: Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 36. Their perspective points to the adoption of an insider’s perspective, while at the same time looking at the phenomena from other angles.

24. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 196–198. When it comes to the aims of public surveys in Nigeria and beyond, Blumer’s words are relevant: “I believe it is fair to say that those trying to study public opinion by polling are so wedded to their technique and so preoccupied with the improvement of their technique that they shunt aside the vital question of whether their technique is suited to the study of what they are ostensibly seeking to study. . . . If public opinion is to be studied in any realistic sense its depiction must be faithful to its empirical character” (196–198).

25. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009). As Kvale and Brinkmann note, “Qualitative methods refer to *what kind*, and quantitative methods to *how much of a kind*” (117).

26. Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 37.

27. Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft*, 299.

28. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 17. As Charmaz states, “The logico-deductive model of traditional quantitative research necessitates operationalizing established concepts in a theory as accurately as possible and deducing testable hypotheses about the relationships between these concepts. In this model, the research is locked into the original concepts.” See also, Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 32–37; 48; 68.

29. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 86. Blumer argues that “the prevailing disposition and practice is to allow the theory, the model, the concept, the technique, and the scientific protocol to coerce the research and thus to bend the resulting analytic depictions of the empirical world to suit their form. In this sense, much current scientific inquiry in the social and psychological sciences is actually social philosophizing” (34). As a result, Blumer notes that “all too frequently, the scholar confronted with an unfamiliar area of social life will fabricate, in advance, analytical schemes he believes necessary to account for the problematic features of the area” (42). And even after the research, Blumer adds that “the objective observer is likely to fill in the process

of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it" (86).

30. Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998), 52.

31. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays*.

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