

“Turning the Story”

The Incident and Response

The incident occurred on the campus of a large public university in a Midwestern city. A decade ago, this city had been designated an “all-American city,” but more recently, its normally tranquil environment has been disturbed by an increasing number of assaults and homicides. Some of these violent incidents have involved students at the university.

The incident that provoked this study occurred on a Monday in October. A forty-three-year-old graduate student, enrolled in a senior-level actuarial science class, arrived a few minutes before class, armed with a vintage Korean War military semiautomatic rifle loaded with a thirty-round clip of thirty caliber ammunition. He carried another thirty-round clip in his pocket. Twenty of the thirty-four students in the class had already gathered for class, and most of them were quietly reading the student newspaper. The instructor was en route to class.

The gunman pointed the rifle at the students, swept it across the room, and pulled the trigger. The gun jammed. Trying to unlock the rifle, he hit the butt of it on the instructor’s desk and quickly tried firing it again. Again it did not fire. By this time, most students realized what was happening and dropped to the floor, overturned their desks, and tried to hide behind them. After about twenty seconds, one of the students shoved a desk into the gunman, and students ran past him out into the hall and out of the building. The gunman hastily departed the room and went out of the building to his parked car, which he had left running. He was captured by police within the hour in a nearby small town, where he lived. Although he remains incarcerated at this time, awaiting trial, the motivations for his actions are unknown.

Campus police and campus administrators were the first to react to the incident. Campus police arrived within three minutes after they had received a telephone call for help. They spent several anxious minutes outside the building interviewing students to obtain an accurate description of the gunman. Campus administrators responded by calling a news conference for 4:00 P.M. the same day, approximately four hours after the incident. The police chief as well as the vice-chancellor of Student Affairs and two students described the incident at the news conference. That same afternoon, the Student Affairs office contacted Student Health and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselors and instructed them to be available for any students or staff requesting assistance. The Student Affairs office also arranged for a new location, where this class could meet for the rest of the semester. The Office of Judicial Affairs suspended the gunman from the university. The next day, the incident was discussed by campus administrators at a regularly scheduled campuswide cabinet meeting. Throughout the week, Student Affairs received several calls from students and from a faculty member about “disturbed” students or unsettling student relations. A counselor of the Employee Assistance Program consulted a psychologist with a specialty in dealing with trauma and responding to educational crises. Only one student immediately set up an appointment with the student health counselors. The campus and local newspapers continued to carry stories about the incident.

When the actuarial science class met for regularly scheduled classes two and four days later, the students and the instructor were visited by two county attorneys, the police chief, and two student mental health counselors who conducted “debriefing” sessions.

Adapted from Creswell and Poth, (2018), p. 374 -398

Handout

“Campus Response to a Student Gunman”**1. A Case Study**

This qualitative case study (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995) presented a campus reaction to a gunman incident in which a student attempted to fire a gun at his classmates. The authors based the composition of this case study on the “substantive case report” format of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Stake (1995). These formats called for an explication of the problem; a thorough description of the context or setting and the processes observed; a discussion of important themes; and, finally, “lessons to be learned” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 362). After introducing the case study with the problem of violence on college campuses, the authors turned to a detailed description of the setting and a chronology of events immediately following the incident and events during the following 2 weeks. Then they presented the important themes related to denial, fear, safety, retriggering, and campus planning. In a process of layering of themes, the authors combined the more specific themes into two overarching themes: an organizational theme and a psychological or social-psychological theme. Asmussen and Creswell (1995) gathered data through interviews with participants, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. From the case emerges a proposed plan for campuses, and the case ends with an implied lesson for the specific Midwestern campus and a specific set of questions this campus or other campuses might use to design a plan for handling future campus terrorist incidents.

Turning to specific research questions in this case, the authors asked the following questions: What happened? Who was involved in response to the incident? What themes of response emerged during an 8-month period? What theoretical constructs helped us understand the campus response, and what constructs developed that were unique to this case? Asmussen and Creswell (1995) entered the field 2 days after the incident and did not use any a priori theoretical lens to guide our questions or the results. The narrative first described the incident, analyzed it through levels of abstraction, and provided some interpretation by relating the context to larger theoretical frameworks. The authors validated the case analysis by using multiple data sources for the themes and by checking the final account with select participants, or member checking.

Handout

1

“Confrontation of Brothers: An Interpretive Biography of an African-American Professor”

2. A Narrative Study

How might we have approached this same general problem as an interpretive biographical study with a narrative approach? Rather than identifying responses from multiple campus constituents, we would have focused on one individual, such as the instructor of the class involved in the incident. We would have tentatively titled the project, “Confrontation of Brothers: An Interpretive Biography of an African American Professor.” This instructor, like the gunman, was African American, and his response to such an incident might be situated within racial and cultural contexts. Hence, as an interpretive biographer, we might have asked the following research question: What are the life experiences of the African American instructor of the class, and how do these experiences form and shape his reaction to the incident? This biographical approach would have relied on studying a single individual and situating this individual within his historic background. We would have examined *life events* or “epiphanies” culled from stories he told me. Our approach would have been to “restore the stories” into an account of his experiences of the gunman that followed a chronology of events. We might have relied on the Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Clandinin (2013) three-dimensional space model to organize the story into the personal, social, and interactional components. Alternatively, the story might have had a plot to tie it together, such as the theoretical perspective. This plot might have spoken to the issues of race, discrimination, and marginality and how these issues played out both within the African American culture and between Black culture and other cultures. These perspectives may have shaped how the instructor viewed the student gunman in the class. We also might have composed this report by discussing our own situated beliefs followed by those of the instructor and the changes he brought about as a result of his experiences. For instance, did he continue teaching? Did he talk with the class about his feelings? Did he see the situation as a confrontation within his racial group? For validation, our narrative story about this instructor would have contained a detailed description of the context to reveal the historical and interactional features of the experience (Denzin, 2001). We also would have acknowledged that any interpretation of the instructor’s reaction would be incomplete, unfinished, and a rendering from our own perspectives as a non-African American and a non-African Canadian.

**“The Meaning of Fear for Students Caught in
a Near Tragedy on Campus”**

3. A Phenomenology

Rather than study a single individual as in a biography, we would have studied several individual students and examined a psychological concept in the tradition of psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Our working title might have been “The Meaning of Fear for Students Caught in a Near Tragedy on Campus.” Our assumption would have been that students expressed this concept of fear during the incident, immediately after it, and several weeks later. We might have posed the following questions: What fear did the students experience, and how did they experience it? What meanings did they ascribe to this experience? As a phenomenologist, we assume that human experience makes sense to those who live it and that human experience can be consciously expressed (Dukes, 1984). Thus, we would bring to the study a phenomenon to explore (fear) and a philosophical orientation to use (we want to study the meaning of the students’ experiences). We would have engaged in extensive interviews with up to 10 students, and we would have analyzed the interviews using the steps described by Moustakas (1994). We would have begun with a description of our own fears and experiences (*epoche*) with it as a means to position ourselves, recognizing that we could not completely remove ourselves from the situation. Then, after reading through all of the students’ statements, we would have located significant statements or quotes about their meanings of fear. These significant statements would then be clustered into broader themes. Our final step would have been to write a long paragraph providing a narrative description of what they experienced (*textural description*) and how they experienced it (*structural description*) and combine these two descriptions into a longer description that conveys the *essence* of their experiences. This would be the endpoint for the discussion.

Handout

“A Grounded Theory Explanation of the Surreal Experiences for Students in a Campus Gunman Incident”

4. A Grounded Theory Study

If a theory needed to be developed (or modified) to explain the campus reaction to this incident, we would have used a grounded theory approach. For example, we might have developed a theory around a process—the “surreal” experiences of several students immediately following the incident, experiences resulting in actions and reactions by students. The draft title of our study might have been “A Grounded Theory Explanation of the Surreal Experiences for Students in a Campus Gunman Incident.” We might have introduced the study with a specific quote about the surreal experiences:

In the debriefing by counselors, one female student commented, “I thought the gunman would shoot out a little flag that would say ‘bang.’” For her, the event was like a dream.

Our research questions might have been as follows: What theory explains the phenomenon of the “surreal” experiences of the students immediately following the incident? What were these experiences? What caused them? What strategies did the students use to cope with them? What were the consequences of their strategies? What specific interaction issues and larger conditions influenced their strategies? Consistent with a structured approach to grounded theory, we would not bring into the data collection and analysis a specific theoretical orientation other than to see how the students interact and respond to the incident. Instead, our intent would be to develop or generate a theory. In the results section of this study, I would have first identified the open coding categories that I found. Then, I would have described how we narrowed the study to a central category (e.g., the dream element of the process) and made that category the major feature of a theory of the process. This theory would have been presented as a *visual model*, and in the model we would have included *causal conditions* that influenced the central category, intervening and context factors surrounding it, and specific strategies and consequences (axial coding) as a result of it occurring. We would have advanced *theoretical propositions* or hypotheses that explained the dream element of the surreal experiences of the students (selective coding). We would have validated our account by judging the thoroughness of the research process and whether the findings are empirically grounded, two factors mentioned by Corbin and Strauss (1990, 2015).

Handout

**“ Getting Back to Normal: An Ethnography of a Campus
Response to a Gunman Incident”**

5. An Ethnography

In grounded theory, our focus was on generating a theory grounded in the data. In ethnography, we would turn the focus away from theory development to a description and understanding of the workings of the campus community as a *culture-sharing group*. To keep the study manageable, we might have begun by looking at how the incident, although unpredictable, triggered quite predictable responses among members of the campus community. These community members might have responded according to their roles, and thus we could have looked at some recognized campus microcultures. Students constituted one such microculture, and they, in turn, comprised a number of further microcultures or subcultures. Because the students in this class were together for 16 weeks during the semester, they had enough time to develop some shared patterns of behavior and could have been seen as a culture-sharing group. Alternatively, we might have studied the entire campus community, comprising a constellation of groups each reacting differently.

Assuming that the entire campus comprised the culture-sharing group, the title of the study might have been “Getting Back to Normal: An Ethnography of a Campus Response to a Gunman Incident.” Notice how this title immediately invites a contrary perspective into the study. We would have asked the following questions: How did this incident produce predictable role performance within affected groups? Using the entire campus as a cultural system or culture-sharing group, in what roles did the individuals and groups participate? One possibility would be that they wanted to get the campus back to normal after the incident by engaging in predictable patterns of behavior. Although no one anticipated the exact moment or nature of the incident itself, its occurrence set in motion rather predictable role performances throughout the campus community. Administrators did not close the campus and start warning, “The sky is falling.” Campus police did not offer counseling sessions, although the Counseling Center did. However, the Counseling Center served the student population, not others (who were marginalized), such as the police or groundskeepers, who also felt unsafe on the campus. In short, predictable performances by campus constituencies followed in the wake of this incident.

Indeed, campus administrators routinely held a news conference following the incident. Also, predictably, police carried out their investigation, and students ultimately and reluctantly contacted their parents. The campus slowly returned to normal—an attempt to return to day-to-day business, to a steady state, or to homeostasis, as the systems thinkers say. In these predictable role behaviors, one saw culture at work.

As we entered the field, we would seek to build rapport with the community participants, to not further marginalize them or disturb the environment more than necessary through our presence. It was a sensitive time on campus with people who had nerves on edge. We would have explored the cultural themes of the “organization of diversity” and “maintenance” activities of individuals and groups within the culture-sharing campus. Wallace (1970) defines the “organization of diversity” as “the actual diversity of habits, of motives, of personalities, of customs that do, in fact, coexist within the boundaries of any culturally organized society” (p. 23). Our data collection would have consisted of observations over time of predictable activities, behaviors, and roles in which people engaged that helped the campus return to normal. This data collection would depend heavily on interviews and observations of the classroom where the incident occurred and newspaper

Handout

accounts. Our ultimate narrative of the culture-sharing campus would be consistent with Wolcott's (1994) three parts: a detailed description of the campus, an analysis of the cultural themes of "organizational diversity" and maintenance (possibly with taxonomies or comparisons; Spradley, 1979, 1980), and interpretation. Our interpretation would be couched not in terms of a dispassionate, objective report of the facts, but rather within our own experiences of not feeling safe in a soup kitchen for the homeless (Miller, Creswell, & Olander, 1998) and our own personal life experiences of having grown up in "safe" small Midwestern towns. For an ending to the study, we might have used the "canoe into the sunset" approach (H. F. Wolcott, personal communication, November 15, 1996) or the more methodologically oriented ending of checking our account with participants. Here is the canoe into the sunset approach:

The newsworthiness of the event will be long past before the ethnographic study is ready, but the event itself is of rather little consequence if the ethnographer's focus is on campus culture. Still, without such an event, the ethnographer working in his or her own society (and perhaps on his or her own campus as well) might have a difficult time "seeing" people performing in predictable everyday ways simply because that is the way in which we expect them to act. The ethnographer working "at home" has to find ways in which to make the familiar seem strange. An upsetting event can make ordinary role behavior easier to discern as people respond in predictable ways to unpredictable circumstances. Those predictable patterns are the stuff of culture.

Here is the more methodological ending:

Some of our "facts" or hypotheses may need (and be amenable to) checking or testing if we have carried our analysis in that direction. If we have tried to be more interpretive, then perhaps we can "try out" the account on some of the people described, and the cautions and exceptions they express can be included in our final account to suggest that things are even more complex than the way we have presented them.