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Methods and Approaches for the Study of Theology and Religious Studies

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Today

- How to use non-written material such as oral / verbal / auditory material in essays and the dissertation?
 - Can you think of examples?

Examples of oral sources

- Radio interview
- Life story of a member of your family
- Music / sound
- Personal report of an religious experience
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Background

- Western academia focuses on textual material and highlights the need to provide (written) evidence for every theory
- But what about the things we hear?
- -> common undervaluation of sound and oral material in academic debate as they do not count as objective evidence

Example: Alister Hardy Archive

- Founded by Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985) in Oxford
- Now in Lampeter (located in the UWTSD library)



Alister Hardy Question

- “Have you ever had a spiritual or religious experience or felt a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your every day life?”
- -> RERC received hundreds of personal accounts of religious or spiritual experiences

- One of the first accounts describes, for instance, the uplifting experience the person felt in a hotel room in London in 1948 (RERC 00000).
- Another account describes an event while walking...

Excerpt

- “As I sat on a low wall opposite a beautiful tree covered with pink blossom, thrown into relief by the high hill behind it, I was suddenly made aware of my surroundings in a manner difficult to describe in words. The tree became vibrant, 'real' (in the sense that the 'burning bush' did to Moses in the O.T.) and I was transported into what I can only term 'reality', and was filled with a great surge of joy (i.e. like C.S. Lewis's 'Surprised by Joy'). This was fundamental and I was 'caught up into it' and was a part of it. I felt a great sense of awe and reverence, permeated by the presence of a power which was completely real and in which I had my part to play. I knew that all was well and that all things were working together for good.” (RERC 000011)

- A common feature in most accounts is the sense of uniqueness of the experience, that it is not possible to repeat it and that it changed one perception of things, sometimes even the life.

- However, despite the vast amount of data at hand the study of religious experience still faces challenges.
- Hardy defined religious experience as “a deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond, and far greater than, the individual self” (Hardy 1979: 1).
- Such an experience can take place in solitude or as part of a communal ritual, firmly linked to a specific religious tradition or not at all, result in dramatic movements or restricted to internal emotions.

However ...

- We can collect mass of data of personal accounts, in the end they remain subjective narrative of what might have happened.

- Religious experience is usually described as private and unavailable “for empirical (that is, sensory) confirmation” even when later these accounts become “very public and therefore available for empirical confirmation” (McCutcheon 2012: 8).

Problem with studying what we cannot see

- “While I cannot accept explanation given by millions of Brazilian believers that the divinity Xango is really present, I do not want to denigrate their experience either by reducing it to psycho-social or other factors in arrogant presumptuousness I prefer to say that I do not understand what is going on. But I am searching for a level at which I can share some common feeling with these Brazilian believers: one small area would be the admiration for the great spectacle.” (Mark Münzel 1994, p. 143)

What about alien abduction?

- The consensus among scholars is that alien abductions did not take place, that the memory is fault as there is 'no originary event behind the memories' (1998: 109).
- But if we read these reports as religious narratives 'there is no reason to assume that the reports of experiences by mystics, shamans, or meditation masters are any more credible as 'phenomenological descriptions' than those of the abductees' (Sharf 1998: 110).

- The same can be said about other forms of religious or mystical experiences. We do not have access to a core mystical experience, only to texts that describe the experience, whether it is the experience of an abductee, a shaman or a mystic (Proudfoot 1985).

Empirical vs. subjective?

- The term 'experience' "is often used rhetorically to thwart the authority of the 'objective' or the 'empirical', and to valorize instead the subjective, the personal, the private" (Sharf 1998: 94).

Challenge for oral material

- The use of oral material faces similar challenges.
- Can it be empirical “true” if there is no textual evidence, just an account by the researcher?



Practical tips

- The importance of note-taking
 - Including date, location, time
 - When using it in an essay or dissertation reference the event in a footnote, e.g.:
“Observed on 3rd of April 2015 in Cardiff”

But

- Be self conscious aware how your presence may have influenced the event
- Be careful in your interpretation as it does not count as objective evidence
 - Do not make general statements but present it as personal, individual impressions

Conclusion

- Yes, you may use other than textual material in your essay and dissertation
- But you need to add references and be careful in your interpretation

Further reading

- Stausberg, M. & S. Engler (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2011).