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Contemporary Approaches in Training & Education for Cross-Cultural Competence – potentials, challenges and its limits

The Use of Sacred Texts in Understanding Selected Cultural Aspects of the Egyptian and British Cultures – a pilot study

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Abstract

Sacred texts such as the Bible and the Qur'an are cultural products whose meanings, though largely shared by vast populations, vary significantly across socio-cultural groups. Therefore, it seems likely that such texts can be used fruitfully to elicit ethnographic data without the interference of assumptions about the researcher's cultural background and communicative intentions. This paper reports an initial exploration into the merits of using sacred texts in social research by investigating individual and cultural differences relating to self-worth, attitudes to parents and doing good to others.

Five participants were individually presented with sets of seemingly-contradictory Biblical or Qur'anic verses and asked to comment on the meaning of each verse in the context of at least one personal experience in which the verse is relevant. The data collection process by semi-structured interviews and the findings support our assumption that the use of sacred texts in qualitative ethnographic research holds much promise.

Keywords:

Methodology, sacred texts, Christians and Muslims, Egypt and the UK

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the use of sacred texts (selected verses from the Bible and the Qur'an) in an attempt to provide initial answers to two research questions: RQ1: What are the advantages and challenges of using sacred texts in cross-cultural research? RQ2: How are the following themes perceived in each of the British and Egyptian cultures: self-worth, attitudes to parents, and doing good to others? We begin by introducing some important issues relating to the impact of culture on research instrument design in order to highlight the potential advantages of drawing on sacred texts in qualitative ethnographic studies and we proceed to probe into the merits of using pairs of contrasting, seemingly contradictory, excerpts from the Bible and the Qur'an to elicit ethnographic data through semi-structured interviews. This is followed by a brief description of our findings, which are consistent with the view that sacred texts can be used effectively to collect qualitative ethnographic data.

2. Sacred texts and the impact of culture on the design of research instruments

The difficulty to phrase questions (Lever, 1981 in Arksey and Knight, 1999) or the possibility of their misinterpretation (Arksey and Knight, 1999) in qualitative research should come as no surprise. After all, the designer usually starts with his or her own 'context' in which the questionnaire/interview items are designed. In this case, the participants' context (which needs to be triggered by the questions) (Sperber and Wilson, 2004) is not known to the designer. While questionnaire designers do their best to phrase their questions 'impartially,' it can be claimed that this impartiality is 'theoretically impossible' due to the dependence of linguistic communication on context. The context in which a communicative act is processed cannot be fully controlled by the researcher and may not be available to the consciousness of either the researcher or the participants. It seems plausible to argue that the use of publicly available texts shared by vast populations could be used to elicit data about peoples' beliefs, attitudes and values in a way which casts light on their contextual assumptions which inform their interpretations of those texts. It should then be possible to investigate systematically to what extent these contextual assumptions reflect differences in participants' individual and cultural backgrounds.

Cultural studies are replete with examples where a questionnaire item or interview question carries clear (or sometimes subtle) cultural biases. The bias could be due to the context that the researcher assumes should be triggered to respond to his or her questions. While the context is readily available to the designer, there could be a large number of possible contexts accessible to participants at varying degrees (Sperber and Wilson, 2004). Moreover, as Hall (1989) observes, people are often 'blind' to the cultural origins of their background beliefs, and this is typically reflected in the perception that one's culture is 'normal', 'neutral' and probably 'right' due to its inherent natural properties. Moreover, researchers sometimes bring in their own cultural context(s) into the research with the – sometimes implicit – assumption that such contexts are shared by the informants.

2.1. Why does the use of sacred texts in cross-cultural research hold promise?

The importance of the contexts in which participants interpret questions is illustrated by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (2007) investigation into the distinction between 'Diffuse' cultures (where individuals' social roles overlap) and 'Specific' cultures (where individuals' social roles do not overlap). One question these authors asked participants to answer was: "Would you agree to help your boss paint his house at the weekend if you didn't want to?" The expectation was that a 'yes' would be given by participants from diffuse cultures (where a boss is revered even outside working hours) and a 'no' by those from specific cultures (where a boss assumes a higher position only on weekdays in a work environment). The researchers reported on their 'surprise' at the Japanese negative answer to this question. In follow up interviews the Japanese participants revealed that their negative answer was due to the fact that "the Japanese never paint houses" (p. 87). This anecdote is a good example of an important limitation of questionnaires in social research. Answers to direct questions reveal less about a person's cultural and individual background than the contextual assumptions and inferential routes which support their answers. This suggests that semi-structured interviews are likely to fare much better than questionnaires in social research aimed at uncovering the systems of cultural knowledge and culture-specific patterns of reasoning. However, (semi-)structured interviews will be more reliable and lead to more informative responses than questionnaires only if the prompts interviewers use to elicit the data meet certain criteria. First, they should be easy for participants to relate to. Second, the context in which the prompts can be interpreted meaningfully (i.e. contexts in which they are informative or relevant) should be readily available to the participants (otherwise the comprehension and interpretation process will not be intuitive and spontaneous, requiring conscious effort). The importance of this point is underscored by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) discussion of nonhuman instruments (such as questionnaires) in naturalistic inquiry. As these authors point out:

there is no hope that such [nonhuman] instruments can expose anything not built into them by the instrument maker, and what he or she puts in cannot be determined in any other way than on the basis of a priori theory or personal predilection. Such instruments simply cannot reflect the constructions of the respondents, but only of the instrument maker. (p. 239)

Third, the context for the interpretation of the prompts should not be dominated by assumptions about the researcher's aims and expectations. Fourth, while being intelligible to the participants, the prompts should motivate them to invest (spontaneously) some effort into figuring out their meanings, leading to richer interpretations.

These four criteria are not arbitrary. They follow in a straightforward way from assumptions which form the basis of the relevance-theoretic model of human communication and cognition developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995). Relevance theory is an approach to communication which builds on the view that people are predisposed to pay attention to phenomena in their environment when doing so is likely to bring about improvements in their belief system. In other words, we tend to pay attention to stimuli which we expect will turn out to be relevant to us. Some stimuli, which include pointing gestures and utterances, are designed to create an expectation that paying attention to them will yield significant cognitive rewards. In other words, they are designed to create expectations of their own informativeness (technically, relevance). Relevance is defined as a positive function of informativeness and a negative function of mental processing effort. In this

view, the prompts used in interviews in qualitative social research should be easy for participants to relate to, because people have a natural expectation that the relevance of communicative acts should be evident, that it should not require much mental effort. This is particularly important in a situation where the effort invested in the comprehension and interpretation of the communicative act is for the benefit of the researcher. The research interview is a communication situation where the participants provide the researcher with evidence of the way the prompts used to elicit their responses are relevant to (i.e. meaningful for) the participants themselves. This is unusual, because the speaker's orientation in most ordinary communication situations is towards providing information which is directly relevant to the hearer. In other words, the prompt used in a research interview is a somewhat atypical communicative act in that it is aimed to elicit information about the informativeness of the prompt for the participant (i.e. the hearer) rather than the researcher who uses the responses to the prompts as evidence for his or her own conclusions about the meanings of those prompts, rather than merely recovering the meanings that the participants intended to convey. Another prediction of Relevance theory is that the initial expectation of informativeness of a prompt should be borne out by its integration with the immediate context available to the participant. If it is not, then there is a risk that the participant will lose the motivation to explore the meaning of the prompt, because the interpretation of the prompt requires more processing effort than the participant is willing to expend (for the researcher's benefit). Moreover, if the initial context includes assumptions about the researcher's preferences and goals, the inferential process of interpretation may lead the participant to derive conclusions which seem to the participant to be relevant to the researcher, rather than reflecting the way the prompts are relevant to the participant. Playing to the hearer's expectations is conducive to communicative and social success in many ordinary everyday communication settings, but the research interview is not among them. Finally, Relevance theory predicts that interpretations of communicative acts will be richer if more effort is invested in deriving them. So, while the prompts used in research interviews should be easy to understand, they should also motivate the participants to go beyond the first, superficial, interpretation and derive richer ones.

Sacred texts are cultural products whose characteristics suggest that they can be used as sources of prompts for semi-structured interviews in a way which meets the four criteria considered above. First, vast numbers of people readily relate to sacred texts such as the Bible and the Qur'an, and these texts are intuitively relevant to them and the contexts for their interpretation are readily available. Moreover, as sacred texts are cultural products with social functions, they are likely to be interpreted readily and spontaneously from the participants' own perspectives, without the participants' being inclined to play to the researcher's expectations. Sacred texts are already meaningful for the participants, who are likely to report their existing understandings of those texts without feeling the pressure to adjust their reports to the researchers' expectations. Moreover, the understandings of sacred texts are implicitly (or explicitly) ratified by the socio-cultural group in which the participants are integrated as members, so their point of reference in reporting on their interpretations of those texts is always likely to be the beliefs, attitudes and values of the socio-cultural group with which they identify, rather than researchers' (presumed or actual) expectations. Moreover, while the relevance of sacred texts is evident to those who assent to them, these texts are designed to challenge their readers. In Relevance theory terms, by making a plausible interpretation less than straightforward to access, the text invites readers to invest more processing effort and derive richer meanings (technically, greater

cognitive gains). It seems plausible to assume that contrasting excerpts from a given sacred text could be used fruitfully to challenge participants in interviews, motivating them to come up with relatively rich meanings. Moreover, sacred texts are concerned largely with aspects of human existence, including various aspects of life in society, so have the potential to provide prompts for eliciting responses about major themes, including self-worth, attitudes towards parents and doing good for others, which are the focus of our initial study.

In this study, selected Biblical and Qur'anic verses are used as prompts in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Five interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted between 38 to 96 minutes each, and involved three Christian British female participants (pseudonyms henceforth: Liz, Margaret and Christina), one Christian Egyptian male (Adel) and one Muslim British male (Omar). All participants were selected by purposive sampling (see Denscombe, 2014).

Two caveats are in order here. Firstly, this sample is evidently not representative of the Egyptian or British cultures. Second, in using the terms 'Egyptian culture' and 'British culture' we do not endorse the view that national cultures in general and these two cultures in particular are either homogenous or clearly delineated entities. However, in line with the epidemiological perspective on communication and culture outlined in Žegarac (2007), we assume that national cultures can be taken to exist in the same way as geographical regions do even though they may not have clear boundaries or contents which can always be listed. Thus, it is not possible to draw the border of the South Midlands or to state how high above the ground of the South Midlands an airplane or other flying object must be to be considered as being above rather than inside this region. Although the national model of culture (as developed and used in Hofstede's (1991) and others' work) has been criticized extensively (for example by McSweeney, 2002, and Piller, 2011), the concept of national culture is nevertheless useful, but needs to be used cautiously.

The three sets of verses used in this study revolve around the themes of self-worth, attitudes towards parents, and doing good to others. The not-too-specific nature of the three themes allows for some flexibility in the interview and guarantees the applicability of these themes to all participants. [Note: Not all participants are of the same marital status for example, but they all have (had) parents. Pseudonyms are used to replace participants' real names to protect their anonymity. Four out of the five interviewees chose their own pseudonyms. This was done with the aim that anonymity is respected while at the same time every participant can trace their own words in the published report of the study.]

3. Findings

The interviews carried out with each participant individually aimed to elicit information about their thoughts, attitudes and values relating to several pairs of contrasting Biblical or Qur'anic verses (according to the interviewee's religious background), including the following:

1. (a) "... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16 NIV Bible)" and

(b) "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
so that your giving may be in secret. (Matthew 6: 3-4 NIV Bible)"

2. (a) “And proclaim the Grace of your Lord. (Ad-Duha 11)” and

(b) “If you disclose your *Sadaqat*, it is well, but if you conceal it, and give it to the poor, that is better for you. (Al-Baqara 271)”

When Liz and Margaret were each asked individually to comment on the first Biblical verse and then the second, they assented to both verses. However, in their explanation they seemed to find ‘giving in secret’ theme more relevant than that of ‘blowing one’s trumpet when giving to the needy’. They both explained that the idea of ‘letting your light shine’ and ‘seeing your good deeds’ did not necessarily mean telling others about one’s good deeds in public. In contrast to Liz and Margaret, Christina seemed to favor the ‘letting your light shine’ theme.

The theme that was emphasized by the five participants in response to this set of verses is ‘attitude’ (Liz, Margaret, Adel and Christina) and ‘intention’ (Omar and Margaret).

In the discussion on the attitudes towards parents, Christina maintained that honoring biological parents leads to good results in the society while Adel and Omar believed that parents are the ones who give the most and therefore deserve respect. Margaret was of the opinion that it is important to be in a mutually respectful relationship with parents who may be the only family one has. Omar referred to the extensive knowledge fathers and mothers have and that this justifies listening to their advice. Margaret compared the British society with the Greek culture saying that the British are less pressured to ‘make the parents happy’. She thinks that part of honoring is to fulfill one’s own happiness and not having to fall under some social pressure observed in for example the Greek society where one needs to ‘get married’ by a certain age to make parents happy. Liz seems to confirm this idea as she believes that the British society expects adult children to ‘challenge parents respectfully’ and that respect does not mean being ‘obsequious’.

While Christine talked about the emotional support parents need, Adel added practical examples of how to honor parents (for example cooking something they like, taking them to the doctor’s or watching a football game together). Respondents seemed to give their definitions of ‘honoring’ based on their situation. For example, all participants referred to examples of parents in the old age apart from Margaret – who belongs to a younger age group – who referred to examples (that she didn’t particularly support) about ‘being a good child’, and ‘doing what’s right’.

Loving God more than parents was accepted by Liz and Christina who believed priorities have to be in place and that God has to come first. They gave examples of becoming a Christian (Liz) or converting to Christianity (Christina) as examples of loving God more than one’s parents if they are against such decision. Adel didn’t categorically mind the idea, but he was of the opinion that it is not ‘love’ that one should give God more of; it is that one should obey God if a parent has a value or principle that clearly opposes God’s (he gave examples of ‘a father who approves of bribery or theft’). On the other hand, Margaret and Omar didn’t seem to agree with the content of the verse calling for ‘loving God more than parents’. Omar thought that one should love everyone even those who oppose God as that is the essence of morality and decency. He went on to say that he needed to study the context of the verse and the rest of the Qur’an before he can know for sure what the verse really

meant. Margaret had a problem agreeing with the 'comparison' attitude of the verse. She thought that one can surely love God and love parents at the same time and that no 'linear' ranking is necessarily needed. Besides, she mentioned the practical difficulty of measuring and implementing such advice.

All five participants agreed that humans have some special value when compared with other creatures. Human lives are significant (Liz), valuable (Christina), colored with some special beauty (Adel), and of a basic level of worth that may change (Margaret). Omar maintained that the special status humans hold is related to the bountiful provision of God. Having such value is not perceived by any of the participants as incompatible with the fact that a human life on earth is limited in duration. The reason behind the value we have as humans ranged between having emotions (Adel), having been created (Margaret), having been designed in a unique way that cannot be explained only biologically (Liz), and being created for a purpose (Christina).

4. Conclusion

This paper makes a case for using sacred texts in qualitative cross-cultural research. We have argued that some well-known methodological difficulties in collecting qualitative data can be explained in terms of the nature of interviews as communication situations and that sacred texts as cultural products have certain properties which suggest that they could be used fruitfully as part of semi-structured interviews in ethnographic research in a way which overcomes those difficulties. The five interviews we have conducted using excerpts from sacred texts as prompts suggest that this approach holds some promise. The interviewer's perception that participants were engaged with the excerpts they were asked to comment on and motivated to give their own interpretations was supported by the feedback the participants gave following the interviews. It is particularly encouraging that, when asked whether they would have responded in the same way if the interviews had been conducted by another interviewer, perhaps one of a different faith or gender for example) the participants were of the view that their responses would have been different: "... I would have responded differently, simply because we [Liz and the interviewer who is a Christian himself] speak the same language. When we talk about these things, I know you understand what I'm saying, because we share the same worldview and we have a relationship with the same God." (Liz). On the other hand, Omar (Muslim British) said,

You are a good candidate to conduct the interview as you were able to help me decipher the texts. I'm not a theologian myself, but I'm happy you're here because you've got the best of the two worlds or actually the three worlds: you speak Arabic, you were born and raised in Egypt, you are a Christian and you've lived in England, so you actually helped me understand the texts. (Omar)

It is interesting to see that some participants came to the interview expecting to 'understand more' not just simply to 'give information'. This is in line with Kvale and Brinkmann's (2008) idea that interviews could be used to co-construct knowledge. In this case the researcher is not simply 'mining' for the information; rather, he/she is a traveler gaining the experience while adding to it too.

The participants' responses in interviews highlighted some important differences in relation to the three themes investigated through the use of sacred texts. Although these initial interviews did not result in the collection of particularly rich ethnographic data the participants' engagement with the themes raised by the

verses they were presented with suggests that more extensive use of apposite probing questions during the interview could lead to richer data about cultural and individual differences in relation to the themes under investigation.

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