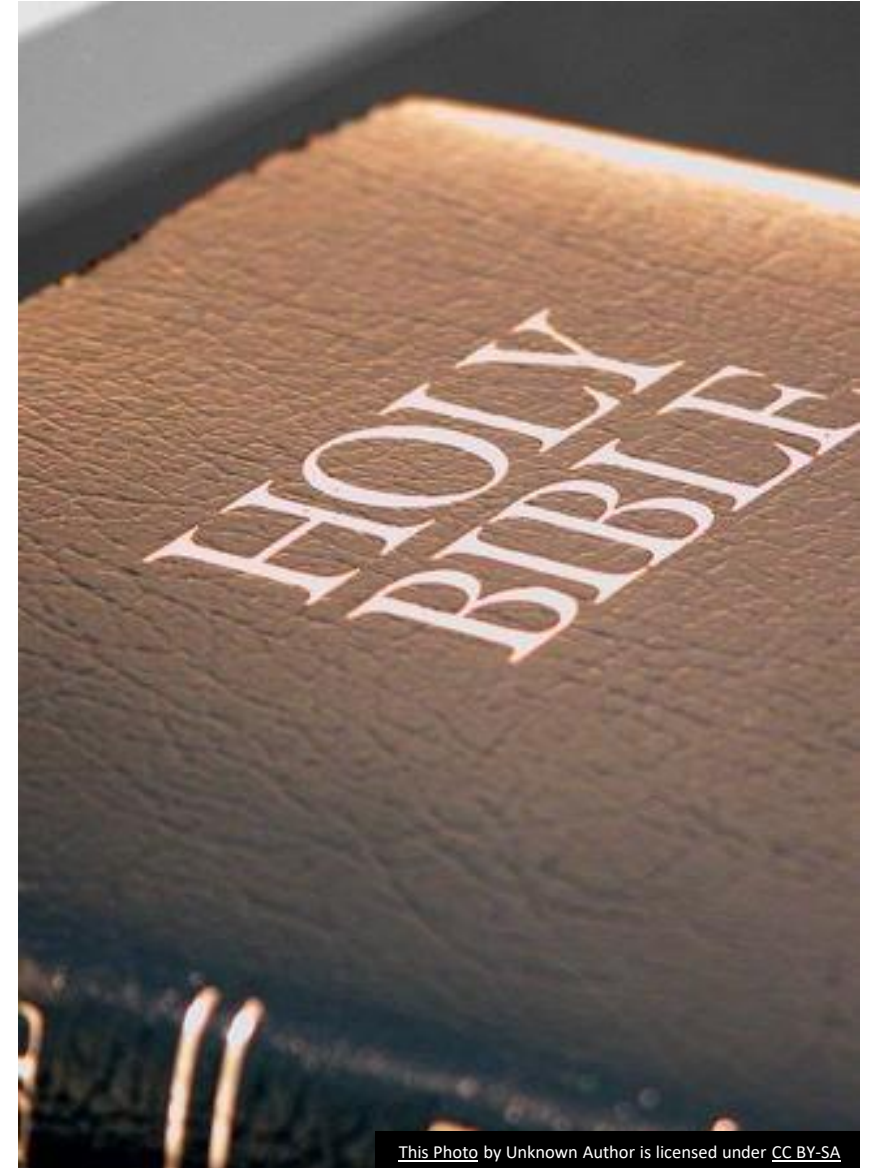


# The Use of Sacred Texts as Tools to Enhance Comparative Interview Research

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# An Outline

- The challenge?
- Sacred texts ... why?
- The study

# Painting Houses!

“Would you agree to help your boss paint his house at the weekend if you didn’t want to?”

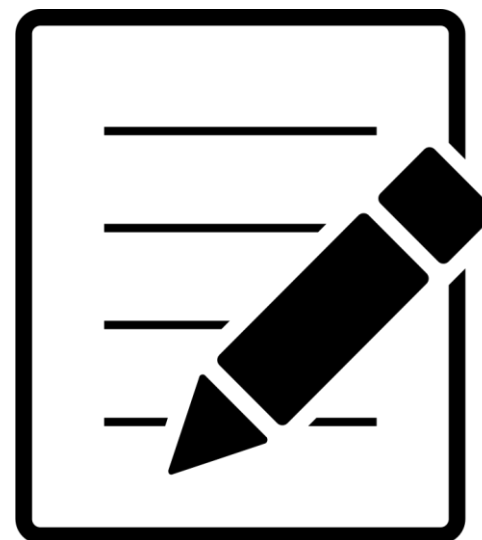
Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2007: 87)



# Cultural Products?

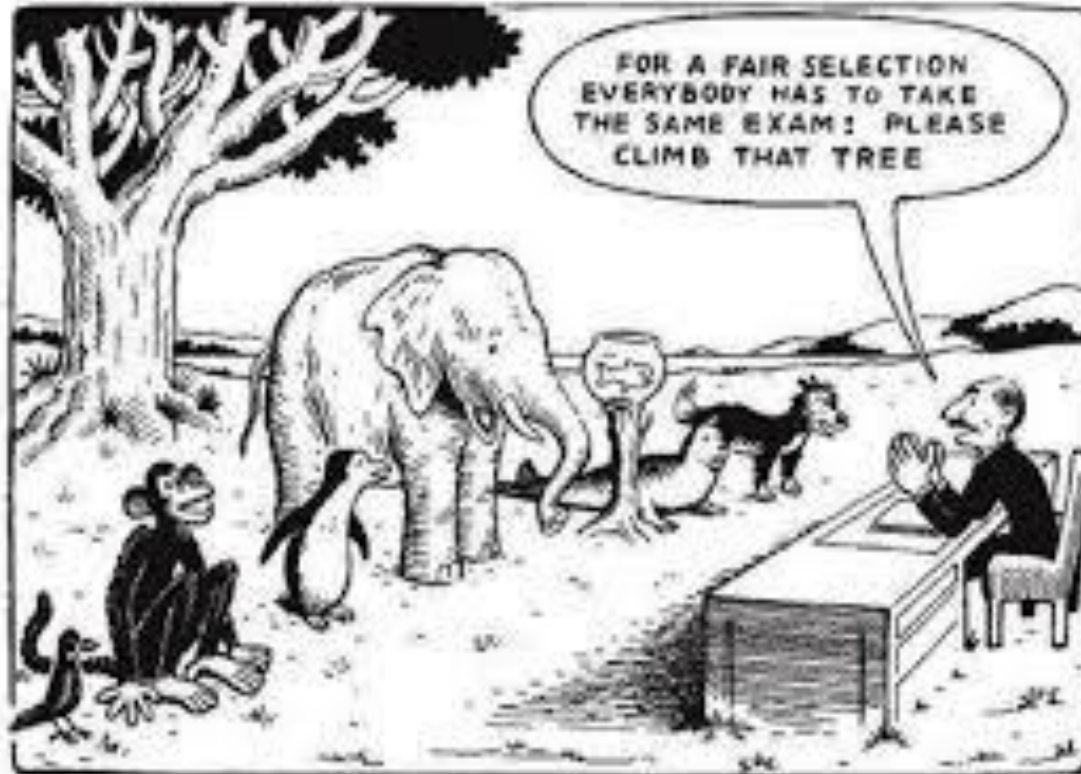


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# What's Missing?

- A research tool that is  
 relevant to participants (personal)



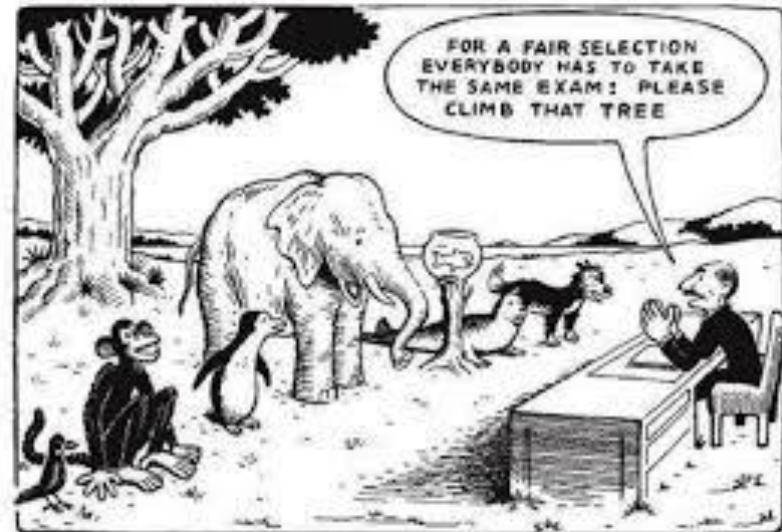


But that's irrelephant! ☹️



# What's Missing?

- A research tool that is
  - ❑ relevant to participants (**personal**)
  - ❑ **Less biased** towards the researcher
  - ❑ **Universal** enough (transcultural)



# A Transcultural text?

“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.”

(Lincoln and Guba, 1985:239)



# What is needed?

- Smith and Bond (1993: 74) argue that

‘[w]hat is needed is a way of linking the two approaches – an emic way of being etic!’

# Sacred Texts ... Why?

- Authenticity
- Accessibility – Cognitive salience

“the greater the amount of processing involved in the formation of an assumption, and the more often it is accessed thereafter, the greater its accessibility.”

(Sperber and Wilson, 2004: 77)

- Familiarity with the form – ease of processing

One factor affecting the processing effort exerted by the hearer to interpret the utterance is “the form in which it is presented (audibility, legibility, dialect, register, syntactic complexity and familiarity of construction all affect processing effort).”

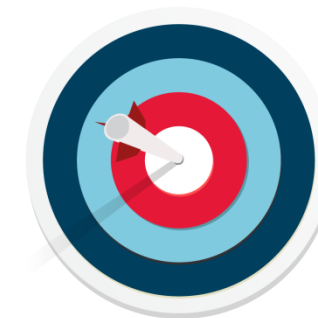
(Wilson and Sperber, 1998: 9)

# Sacred Texts ... Why?

- **Authority** – Subscribed to (either/or, exclusivity)
- **Quality of translation**
- **Universal/Personal nature**
- **Covering a wide range of social issues**
- **Targeting audiences in all classes, genders, age groups, etc.**
- **Some similarities across holy books**

# Theoretical Assumptions

- Sacred texts have some **qualities** that make them potential interview-enhancing tools.
- To the relevant followers of faith, sacred texts carry some **authority** and **relevance**,
- and it could be presumed that subscribers to the text will find **something they can discuss and relate to** if asked to explain a verse or a section from their sacred book.
- Moreover, in the way they are worded, sacred texts **do not suffer from some bias in the question designing** stage since they are already in the public domain rather than designed by the researcher.



# Research Aims

This empirical research aimed to examine this initial theoretical assumption,

that sacred texts, if used with the relevant faith followers, can enhance interview dynamics (process),

leading to a flowing contextualized discussion,

which in turn can lead to credible and rich data (content).

# Research Objectives

- Examine the interview **dynamics** (including the interviewer-interviewee relationship) where sacred texts are used to start and sustain a discussion.
- Understand instances where the interviewee shows **empowerment** and ownership of the discussion.
- Assess the **richness**, nuances, and variety of the data gathered in the interviews.

# What is an Enhanced Interview?

- is an individual research interview setting where both interviewer and interviewee engage in what Rubin and Rubin (2012) call an 'extended conversation.'
- The purpose of such a conversation is to explore in depth some topics and themes (from angles) of relevance to the interviewee.
- The ultimate goal of such a setting is to produce interview data that are varied and rich enough to allow for the appropriate data analysis approach(es) (such as thematic analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, etc.) according to the specific research aim(s).



# An Enhanced Interview aims at

... a flowing conversation that can produce rich and varied data, and, therefore, can be defined as an

**interviewee-centred**

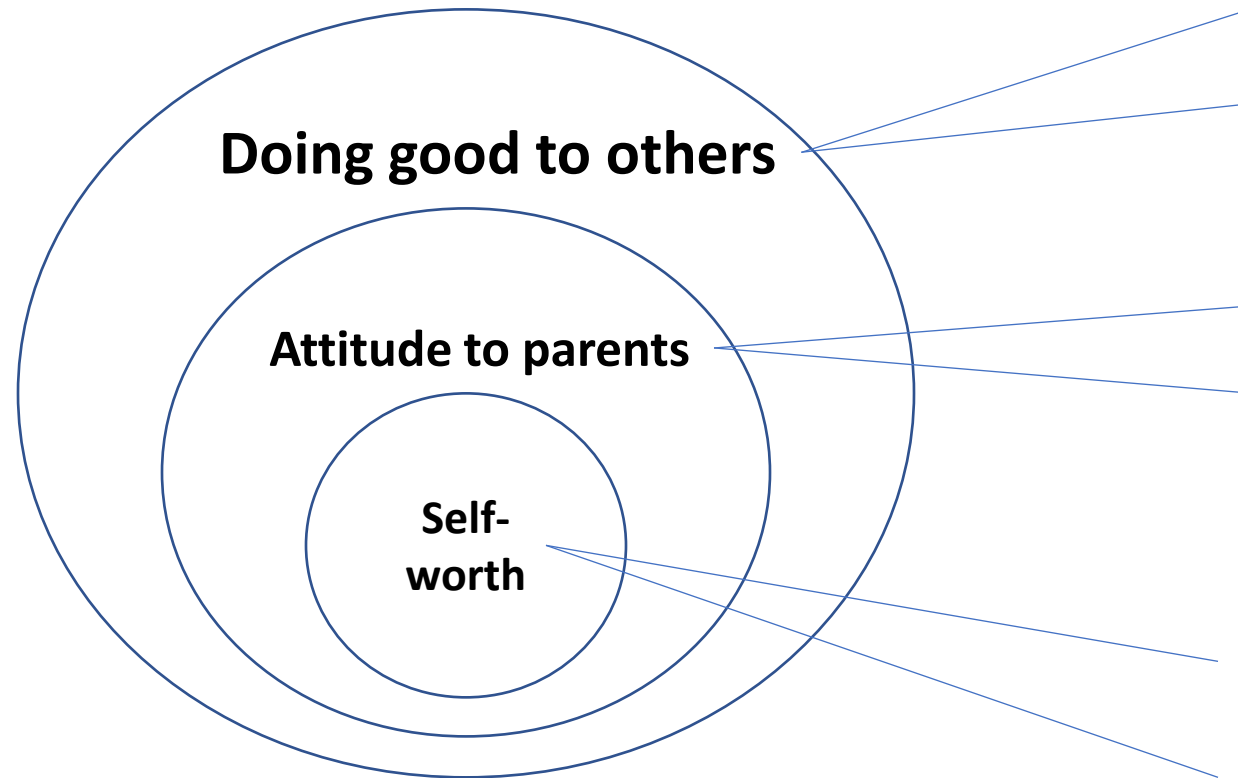
**interviewee-empowering dialogue**

**contextualised in interviewee-relevant themes.**

# Methodology

- 28 interviewees
- Muslim and Christian participants
- for an average of 83 minutes (a total of 38.8 hours of data)
- three sets of one-or-two-sentence-long verses from the participant's sacred book (the Bible or the Qur'an).
- around the social themes: doing good to others, attitudes towards parents, and self-worth.

# Design



# An Example

**Exodus 20:12** New International Version (NIV)

**Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.**

# An Example

**Matthew 10:37** New International Version (NIV)

**Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.**

# Some Findings

- **What? (Content)**: Contextualisation and Richness
- **How? (Process)**: Flow of dialogue and Ownership
- **Who? (Inter-actants)**: the Interviewer, the Interviewee, and the interactional identities

# Some Data Excerpts - **Content**

“I know, I know that I can trust God,

and ... you know,

it says in 1Corinthians 10: 13, that God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (Robert, UK)



# Some Data Excerpts - Content

“and going back to what I was saying earlier as in you got those poor people” (Omar, UK)

“you should help those in need, but you shouldn’t be overt about it” (Robert, UK)

Nancy (Christian Irish, 63) commented on ‘Honor your father and your mother’ saying, “(laughter) It’s one I frequently quote to my son (laughter).”

# Findings – the ‘content’

- Content: **Contextualisation**

1. References to other parts of the sacred teachings
2. Interviewees’ attempts to figure out the context
3. References to previous verses in this research
4. References to other sacred codes (other faiths)
5. Referring to notions discussed earlier in the interview

# Findings – the ‘content’

- Content: **Richness**

1. More comprehensive understanding
2. The possibility of different interpretation
3. Interviewees giving practical and hypothetical examples
4. Interviewees sometimes provided some ‘abstract’ ideas.
5. Referring to ‘culture’
6. The interviewees refer to specific life events where the verses were consulted or relevant
7. Telling stories
8. References to professional or personal Issues

# Some Data Excerpts - Process

“I enjoyed it very much.

You’ve made me produce organized answers.

If I had been asked the questions in the conventional [normal] way, I feel I wouldn’t have been able to gather my thoughts the way I did.”  
(Boules, Egypt)

# Some Data Excerpts - **Process**

“Now? At the moment? I don’t know; I feel I’ve enjoyed myself,  
If you have more verses, erm., prepare more verses and let’s discuss  
them,

It’s nice!” (Mohammad, Egypt)

# Some Data Excerpts - **Process**

“... and you have then to know how tortured I am in Egypt, Maged (laughter), I am really tortured in Egypt because no one plans, and no one sets appointments to the exact five minutes, so I really struggle, but anyway! This is not our topic.” (Nardine, Egypt, 57)

# Some Data Excerpts - Process

- “You make me think of things I’ve never thought about before.”  
(Medhat, Egypt, 27)
- “I’ve never looked at it in this much detail” (Maryam, UK, 35)



# Some Data Excerpts - Process

- “I’m glad you made me think. There are some things that I haven’t thought about before or linked them to my childhood for example. There are things that I haven’t stopped one point at a time to think about, but I’m glad you selected controversial verses. Those verses are important and need people to think about, and I’m glad you asked me for my personal rather than official opinions.” (Medhat, Egypt, 27)

# Some Data Excerpts - Process

“Again, it was fascinating and interesting for me as well. You’d think that in this kind of interview situation, that it would be just giving answers, but these answers are things that I don’t, you don’t, often think about it till you’re asked, so it’s fascinating to be asked some of these questions and also to ponder upon: ‘so what is my position?’ ‘what are my feelings on this?’ so it was, it was equally equally interesting.” (Faysal, UK, 30)

## Some Data Excerpts - Process

“That’s a good question. [a 5-second pause] Erm. I wonder, I don’t know, I haven’t thought of it. I mean, when one thinks about his- or her life, or think of my father and mother, there is no one that can replace them. There is no way. Not amazing friends, not amazing uncles and family” (Sarah, Egypt, 38)

## Some Data Excerpts - Process

“I don’t apply the verse to the end. Because I sometimes talk with him [my father] angrily, sometimes I tell him something to his face the way I feel it. Without making it lighter and without making it sound nicer and without beautifying it. For example I can tell him that he is egotistical. This is something that I don’t consider ‘being dutiful’ to be honest.”  
(Mostapha, Egypt, 29)

# Some Data Excerpts - Process

“I don’t understand it well. I myself don’t understand well. You know? But you could say that ‘unjust and ignorant’ could mean that he doesn’t know what could happen or the extent of the power of this stewardship? It could be so, but I don’t understand it well.” (Hassan, Egypt, 41)

# Some Data Excerpts - **Process**

Boules (Christian Egyptian, 19) said, “No, I don’t understand this verse. I mean, I don’t know how. Erm. I don’t understand the concept of ‘why more’. Why the comparison to start with? I don’t understand.”

# Findings – the ‘process’

- Process: **flow**

1. Interviewee feels the discussion was natural or comfortable
2. Laughter
3. Interviewee says they digress
4. Reference to something that may paint the interviewee in some negative light
5. Interviewee mentions that they have never thought of the question
6. Interviewee says the verse(s) made them think
7. Interviewee seems to think of the answer on the spot
8. Interviewee finds the verse(s) morally challenging
9. Interviewees expressing special emotions towards some verses
10. Interviewee says they don't understand the verse
11. Talking about negative feelings



# Findings – the ‘process’

- Process: **Ownership**

1. Feeling worried that they may be unfamiliar with (some of) the verses
2. Interviewee does not seem to accept the verse or disagrees with it
3. Interviewee expresses that he/she likes the verse
4. Interviewee guesses the answer
5. Interviewee educates the interviewer

# Findings – the ‘**conversation partners**’

- Conversants: Who the **Interviewee** is
  1. The position of the sacred book in one’s life
  2. The familiarity of the interviewee with the verse(s)
  
- Conversants: Who the **Interviewer** is
  1. Gender, faith and nationality of the interviewer
  2. The importance of the interviewer’s attitude

# Findings – the ‘**conversation partners**’

- Conversants: The **interactional** identities
  1. Referring to people or notions or entities known to be mutually known
  2. The role of sharing the same faith with that of the interviewer’s
  3. Interviewee asks the interviewer his opinion (role reversal)
  4. Having known the interviewer from before

# Some Insights

- **Familiarity with and knowledge of the sacred texts**
- **A Sense of Ownership and Pride**
- **Acknowledging the Role of Interviewer**

# An emic way of being etic?

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Can we argue that sacred texts  
can be added to the toolbox of  
social research interviews?



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Thanks 😊

- Keep in touch!

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