Qualitative Data Analysis for Social Research III

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**Exploring Religiosity and Social Behavior**

In this focus group interview with three participants, this qualitative researcher will explore how diverse religious beliefs can influence social interaction and community engagement. The focus of the qualitative data analysis is on the motivation behind the behavior and the operational values that lead to social interaction and community engagement. The primary research question for this study is as follows:

*How are the participants with diverse religious beliefs motivated to interact with others and engage in community activities?*

In the course of completing the analysis of the interview data, another theme emerged that naturally followed the theme of motivation, and that was the participant’s operating values. Values are different than beliefs and the participant’s operating values were strong drivers in how and why they expressed their social interaction and community engagement. A brief formula for how the qualitative research emerged can be construed in this way:

*Religious Beliefs + Motivation + Values = a) Social Interaction & b) Community Engagement.*

The results of the qualitative data analysis of the focus group interviews along with the researcher’s comments are presented in Table 1. Using Microsoft Word, this researcher examined and analyzed the participant interviews and 1) engaged in inductive data coding, 2) identified two major themes in the data, and 3) compared the results within a conceptual matrix supported by the data. This essay will develop the themes of *motivation* and *values* that were found in the qualitative data analysis and then display the descriptions from the interviews that will support these findings.

Table 1: Motivations and Values for Social Interaction

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Religious Beliefs** | **Motivation**  **Intrinsic/Extrinsic** | **Operational Values** | **Social Interaction** | **Community Engagement** |
| Born Again Christian  P1 | My religious beliefs inspire me (I)  Being part of the church community makes me feel connected (I) | I try to follow Jesus’ teachings from the sermon on the mount and his parables.  It’s a way to give back and serve others in need. | I engage more with my neighbors. | Volunteer at the Community Center.  Church actively supports marginalized groups. |
| Spiritual, but not religious  P2 | Spirituality encourages acts of kindness (I)  Spirituality has taught me empathy (I)  Spirituality has made me open-minded (I) | I don’t think organized religion should tell us what to do, though.  Advocate for equal rights for everyone. | Comfortable interacting with people of various backgrounds. | Organizing donation drives for the less fortunate. |
| Agnostic  P3 | I reject religion, but I think it can influence social change by promoting inclusivity. | Value in community service  Being a responsible member of society  Mutual respect  Human rights are the most important moral value.  Religions should be welcoming to everyone.  Churches that exclude people are causing more harm than good. | Build meaningful connections with my neighbors  [based on mutual respect]. | NA |
| Comments | P1 & P2 have intrinsic motivations that leads to social & community engagement.  P3 rejects religion and lacks intrinsic motivation. Offers an opinion, but not a motive. | P1 values are based on the authority of Scripture.  P2 lacks a transcendent purpose for social & community interaction.  Religion is an aversive value to be avoided for P2 & P3. | All participants engage in social interaction but with diverse motivations and values.  P1 & P3’s social interaction is directed toward their neighbors.  P2’s social interaction is diffused, being open to people of different backgrounds. | P1 engages the community as an individual and through a church.  P2 organizes donations as a concerned individual.  P3 does not engage the community. |

**Theme of Motivation**

The born-again Christian (P1) and the Spiritual (P2) participants demonstrated intrinsic motivation for their social behavior. The Agnostic (P3) rejected religion but did not express an intrinsic motivation for his or her social behavior. In Table 2, there is qualitative data that lends support for the interpretation that the born-again Christian was intrinsically motivated by his or her religious beliefs. The intrinsic motivation is emphasized by bolding the descriptive text.

Table 2: Christian Motivations

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Religious Beliefs | Motivations | Social Interaction | Community Engagement |
| **Born-again Christian**  **P1** | My religious beliefs **inspire** me.  Being part of the church community makes me **feel connected.** | I engage more with my neighbors. | Volunteer at the Community Center  Church actively supports marginalized groups. |

For the born-again Christian, there is a clear connection between the religious beliefs and the *inspiration* to engage with one’s neighbors and volunteering at the community center. The connection that this participant feels with the church community has also motivated this participant to support marginalized groups through his or her church. Whether that involves giving money or investing time, P1 is the only subject who engages in social justice through a community effort rather than acting as an individual.

The Spiritual, but not religious participant (P2), is also intrinsically motivated to engage in social behavior as seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Spiritual Motivations

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Religious Beliefs | Motivations | Social Interaction | Community Engagement |
| **Spiritual, but not Religious**  **P2** | Spirituality encourages acts of **kindness**.  Spirituality has taught me **empathy** (I)  Spirituality has made me **open-minded** (I) | Comfortable interacting with people of various backgrounds. | Organizing donation drives for the less fortunate. |

The Spiritual participant (P2) is motivated by intrinsic factors, such as kindness, empathy, and open mindedness. This participant’s inner qualities allow him or her to interact with empathy and compassion with people of various backgrounds. There is a direct connection between the practice of spirituality and the development of inner traits that lead to social interaction with diverse people. P2’s spirituality also expresses itself in social action—organizing donation drives for the less fortunate. P2’s interaction is highly individualistic but does not engage in social change through an organized community or service agency, whether secular or religious.

The Agnostic (P3) is apparently not motivated by intrinsic factors or traits. This participant expresses an opinion about how to influence social change, but there is not a personal connection between his or her ideology and consequent social behavior. In Table 4, the data suggests a desire for social interaction based on the value of mutual respect, but not a result of having personal religious or ideological beliefs. According to the focus group interview, there was no known community engagement.

Table 4: Agnostic Motivations

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Religious Beliefs | Motivations | Social Interaction | Community Engagement |
| **Agnostic** | I reject religion, but I think it can influence social change by promoting inclusivity. | Build meaningful connections with my neighbors based on mutual respect. | NA |

There are many people who ascribe to a set of religious or spiritual beliefs, but their beliefs do not necessarily affect their heart or engage their passion. The motivation to engage in meaningful social interaction and community engagement requires an integration of belief with the desires of the heart, and that holistic integration can inspire advocacy for social change and justice.

**Theme of Values**

Operating values that drove the participants’ social behavior was a common theme that emerged from the qualitative data analysis. According to Hall (1994) *“values are the ideals that give significance to our lives, that are reflected through the priorities that we choose, and that we act on consistently and repeatedly”* (p. 21). Hall’s definition is helpful in discriminating between religious beliefs, intrinsic motivations, and operational values that drive social behavior. The key concepts are “significance to our lives,” “priorities that we choose,” and “act on consistently and repeatedly.” All three participants expressed value-driven behavior in their social interaction and community engagement. In Table 5, there is a compelling relationship between the born-again Christian’s operating values and his or her social interaction and community engagement.

Table 5: Christian Values

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Religious Beliefs | Operational Values | Social Interaction | Community Engagement |
| **Born-again Christian**  **(P1)** | I try to follow Jesus’ teachings from the sermon on the mount and his parables.  It’s a way to give back and serve others in need. | I engage more with my neighbors. | Volunteer at the Community Center  Church actively supports marginalized  groups |

For the born-again Christian, the operating values are based upon Jesus’ teachings from the sermon on the mount and his parables. In contrast with the other participants, P1’s values, such as “giving back and serving others in need,” are not based on humanistic or altruistic principles, but on the authority of Scripture. Another distinguishing attribute is that P1 engages in social change through a missional organization: a community center and the local church. This is in contrast with the Spiritual participant (P2) who is averse to organized religion but it willing to organize donation drives for the less fortunate as a concerned individual as seen in Table 6.

Table 6: Spiritual Values

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Religious Beliefs | Operational Values | Social Interaction | Community Engagement |
| **Spiritual, but not Religious**  **(P2)** | I don’t think organized religion should tell us what to do, though.  Advocate for equal rights for everyone. | Comfortable interacting with people of various backgrounds. | Organizing donation drives for the less fortunate. |

According to the data, P2 is highly individualistic and self-directed in advocating for equal rights, interacting with people of various backgrounds, and organizing donation drives for the less fortunate. However, P2 lacks a transcendent purpose for the social interaction and community engagement and has a negative bias toward the moral authority and influence of organized religion. The Agnostic (P3) is even more resistant toward the inclusion-exclusion boundaries of religious institutions as seen in Table 7.

Table 7: Agnostic Values

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Religious Beliefs | Operational Values | Social Interaction | Community Engagement |
| **Agnostic**  **(P3)** | Value in community service  Being a responsible member of society  Mutual Respect  Human rights are the most important moral value.  Religions should be welcoming to everyone.  Churches that exclude people are causing more harm than good. | Build meaningful connections with my neighbors [based on mutual respect]. | NA |

The term agnostic may be a misnomer because P3 has strong beliefs against religions and churches. Holding to an aversive or negative value may contribute to social behavior in an effort to prove that a religious group or moral position is wrong. The Agnostic does however have positive values that expresses itself in building meaningful connections with his or her neighbors based on the value of mutual respect.

P3 values being a responsible member of society yet does not take action as an individual or collectively in community engagement. Human rights are the most important moral value for P3 but there are no religious or ideological beliefs on which that truth claim can be based. The interview data suggests that the disconnect between agnosticism and the moral imperative placed on human rights may contribute to P3’s lack of community engagement.

**Conclusion and Reflection**

This qualitative study on the relationship between religiosity and social behavior provided an opportunity for this researcher to apply the principles and processes of inductive qualitative analysis. The qualitative data analysis of the focus group interviews was organized around the following research question: *How are the participants with diverse religious beliefs motivated to interact with others and engage in community activities?*

The inductive and iterative process resulted in identifying two major themes that emerged from the interview data. The first theme is what motivates a participant who has religious and ideological beliefs to engage in social interaction and community engagement. P1 and P2 had intrinsic motivations that flowed from their religious or spiritual beliefs, while P3 expressed an opinion about religion, but did have an internal or external motivation. The second theme that emerged from the interview data was how operational values were powerful drivers in terms of how and why the participants engaged in their social behavior. The results of the qualitative data analysis are displayed in Table 1 (p. 3) of this essay and summarizes the impact of intrinsic motivation and operational values on the participants’ social behavior.

My reflection on conducting this qualitative research study was both a disruptive and encouraging experience. This researcher started the process of qualitative data analysis using Dedoose qualitative research software (Salmona, et al., 2020) and had great difficulty learning how to use the software platform and apply its features for the thematic analysis of the interview data. Most of my energy was being spent learning the mechanics of the software and not on the actual analysis of the data. The Dedoose software platform is a highly sophisticated technical product that a researcher must master before attempting to conduct a qualitative study. As the deadline for this assignment was approaching, I realized that I couldn’t learn the software sufficiently well enough to complete the study on time. I abandoned using Dedoose and began using Microsoft Word to conduct the qualitative data analysis that is displayed in this essay.

The encouraging part of this learning experience is that I could effectively code and analyze the qualitative interview data using Microsoft Word. I had direct access to the interview content so that I could color code the descriptive data, cut and paste the data into tables, and then display the themes for interpretive analysis and comments. The analytic process was much easier, and I gained confidence in my intuitive ability to do inductive qualitative analysis with the right software tools. What I learned from this assignment is that I must have a simple and intuitive software program to allow my natural talent for analytical work. I understand that Omega Graduate School has developed such a software tool and will be training its doctoral students to use it for future qualitative research.

Finally, this researcher has read a great deal about qualitative data research through the developmental reading assignments but have not actually done it. Working with the fictional focus group transcript provided an opportunity to develop foundational skills of analyzing and interpreting the interviews of the participants. I remember staring at the data on the computer screen and thinking that I know how to do this, but where do I start? Eventually I began to code the interview data, saw the emerging patterns and themes, and then began to do the iterative work of analyzing and interpreting the qualitative data. I realize that much more practice is needed before this researcher can achieve doctoral level mastery of qualitative research, but I am confident that I can grow into that competency after completing this initial research project.

References

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