Excluded Urban Youth and Religious Discourse in the Trans-local City

Methodological Framework

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Introduction

This Research Project will necessarily adopt an interdisciplinary methodological approach in order to meet the aims of the project. As a result of the ‘Foundational Values’ outlined in the accompanying ‘Theoretical Framework’ paper the approach outlined within Action Research will provide the foundation upon which a range of other methodological approaches will build. The key methodological perspectives that will be drawn upon in fieldwork are:

- **Action Research**: Foundational methodology and motor for grass-roots project outcomes.
- **Ethnography** (and in particular ‘Critical Ethnography’)
  1. Participant Observation
  2. Semi-structured interviews
  3. Focus Groups
- **Discourse Analysis** (and Social Semiotics)
  1. In relation to the ways in which excluded urban youth think and talk about ‘religion’
  2. In relation to the possible relationship between exclusion and religious discourse
  3. In relation to wider religious and politic narratives about exclude urban youth.
- **Contextual Theology**
  1. As a tool that can frame a cross-cultural urban theological reflection on the project.
  2. As a framework for reflective resources that will emerge from the project.

These methodological approaches will be grounded in four further theoretical and hermeneutical perspectives:

**Reflexivity and Standpoint**

Linda Finley and Brendan Gough (2003, 1) suggest that, ‘…reflexivity is a defining feature of human consciousness in a postmodern world.’ The internal life, values and subjectivity of the researcher shapes questions asked and the approach taken to fieldwork. Finley and Gough suggest that reflexivity can be seen as introspection, shared reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique and a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the meanings we attribute to social life (2003, 6-15). They comment, ‘Reflexivity in all its guises is now, arguably, a defining feature of qualitative research.’ (2003, 5)

Standpoint Theory arose within Feminist sociological analysis as a means by which the subjectivity of the researcher could be described and theorised (Patricia Collins-Hill, 1998). The approach suggests that the stance/commitments/experience of the researcher form the foundation of their epistemology and hermeneutical approach, similar to the values base of Contextual Theologies.
Standpoint theory reminds researchers of the political construction of knowledge. Within the context of this research project the importance of acknowledging my own standpoint as a Research Fellow was articulated within the ‘Foundational Values’ of the project and will be exemplified by the centrality of an Action Research methodological stance.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is an approach to qualitative social research that seeks to draw concepts and theories inductively from fieldwork rather than entering the field with a view to proving (or disproving) pre-defined hypotheses. Such a perspective demands detailed fieldwork that is sensitive to the whole range of experience and research material that emerge in the research process. Within this research project Grounded Theory will not be utilised in any narrowly defined sense, rather it will provide a counter to any temptation to make data ‘fit’ pre-defined assumptions of hypotheses with regard to the potential relationship between social exclusion and the use of religious discourse by urban youth. Key early proponents of Grounded theory included Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and more recently Kathy Charmaz (2006) has offered a clear guide to the theory’s central features.


**Street Literacy**

In the accompanying ‘Theoretical Framework’ paper I introduced Caitlin Cahill’s (2000) concept of ‘street literacy’ as an invaluable methodological tool for all fieldwork. Cahill’s suggestion that a clear and open engagement with the cultural, linguistic, social and religious language and assumptions of the ‘street’ is vital if the researcher is to avoid misunderstanding or the imposition of alien value or interpretive systems in relation to fieldwork. Within this research project a ‘street literacy’ approach will make it possible to avoid homogenising fluid urban youth cultures, will
complement the inductive methodology of grounded theory and will enable a constructive use of the experience(s) of youth as the central data bank on which the project will build.

**Nitty-gritty hermeneutics in the Third Space**

Anthony Pinn’s (1991) ‘nitty-gritty’ approach to hermeneutics will be a useful companion to a grounded ‘street literacy’ approach to methodology, especially in the religiously and culturally plural context of urban Birmingham. Such a fluid approach to the process of interpreting experience, findings and conversation will preserve a fluid and inductive model of engagement with the relationship between social exclusion and religious discourse amongst urban youth. Furthermore such an approach will have the capacity to navigate the ‘hybridity’ and dialogical identities that characterise the blurred ‘third space’ of the contemporary urban communities to be surveyed in this research project.

In this short paper I want to summarise each of a range of methodological approaches and then suggest how these will be used within the Research Project over the next 2½ - 3 years.

**Action Research**

As a form of qualitative social research Action Research finds its origins in a range of disciplines and movements:

1. The Social Psychology of Kurt Lewin (1940s >>), especially his work on social change.
2. The critique of positivism and the rise of new epistemologies of experience (1960s >>)
3. Neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, especially Antonio Gramsci and the dictum: ‘the important thing is not just to understand the world but to change it.’
5. Postmodernism and the subjectivity of researchers and the ‘fallacy of objectivity’
6. Poststructuralism: the rejection of the determining force of overarching social structures and an affirmation of the plural and unstable nature of social meaning. See, for example Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.
7. Social Constructionism’s insistence that social realities are provisional human constructions and are therefore context/culture specific.
8. The liberative educational work of Paolo Freire from the early 1960s onwards.

Ernest Stringer (1999, 10) points to the philosophical tenor of Action Research in words that echo the ‘Foundational Values’ of this Research Project, ‘Community-based action research is always enacted through an explicit set of social values…it is democratic, enabling the participation of all people…equitable, acknowledging people’s equality of worth…liberating, providing freedom from
oppresive, debilitating conditions...life-enhancing, enabling the expression of people’s potential.’ Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2006, 1) suggest that, ‘...action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview...It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people.’ The words and phrases underlined highlight the central features of Action Research. It is participatory, cooperative and praxis centred, focused on progressive social change and interlinks action and reflection. For Stringer (1999, 25-26) Action Research consists of eight emphases:

1. The researcher as catalyst not ‘expert’.
2. The empowerment of fieldwork partners.
3. The cyclical process of research.
4. Enabling people to develop their own analyses.
5. Starts where people are, not where a researcher thinks they ‘should’ be.
6. The researcher as facilitator.
7. The Researcher remains researcher not advocate.
8. Focus on human development, not just research solutions.

**Action Research is Participatory**

1. Enables active involvement
2. Enables people to become involved in significant ways
3. Supports people as they learn to act for themselves
4. Encourages people to plan actions they can accomplish themselves
5. Deals with people personally rather than through representatives

Participatory Action Research proceeds through repeated cycles, in which researchers and the community start with the identification of major issues, concerns and problems, initiate research, originate action, learn about this action and proceed to a new research and action cycle. This model of research builds on the critical pedagogy put forward by Paolo Freire where students were seen as active partners in a process of conscientisation. It connects too with Antonio Gramsci’s exploration of the role of ‘organic intellectuals’ who worked alongside and acted as advocates for oppressed communities. In this vein researchers can be seen in the terms described by Edward Said (1994, 63) as those who act as a bridge between the community and the academy, ‘Speaking truth to power.’
The form of Participatory Action Research that will be used in this project is depicted below:

Action Research is Co-operative

Action Research is also a co-operative exercise: research ‘with’ not ‘on’ people. The young people who participate in this project will be seen as co-researchers rather than research subjects, echoing the work of John Heron (2006, 145ff). This co-operative ethos critiques the suggestion that the researcher can be seen as an ‘outside’ ‘expert’ and draws on the inductive methodology implied within Grounded Theory rather than the deductive approach of positivist research. This approach will make the fieldwork of the project more challenging and complex since theories, conclusions and, ultimately, a contextual urban youth theology will arise not only from the participant observation of the research fellow but from the mutual process of action-reflection alongside the urban youth who participate in the project. There are 7 stages in this process:

- **Stage 1**: First reflection phase where key themes/questions are agreed.
- **Stage 2**: First fieldwork phase where these themes/questions are explored in context.
- **Stage 3**: First action phase where conclusions/actions arising from Stages 1 and 2 are tested.
- **Stage 4**: Second reflection phase where initial fieldwork and actions are analysed
- **Stage 5**: Second fieldwork phase where re-worked themes/questions are explored in context.
- **Stage 6**: Second action phase where re-worked conclusions/actions are tested.
- **Stage 7**: Third reflection phase where researcher and fieldwork partners draw conclusions together from the research process.

(Dimensions of Participatory Research, Gaventa & Cornwall, p76)
Partnership

In relation to this research project the work of Roger Hart (1992) on the participation of young people in decision-making presents a useful continuum of degrees of partnership as seen below:

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**Ethnography**

Ethnography is perhaps the central methodological tool of Anthropology and emerged as a distinct discipline during the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Much
early ethnography entailed the study by European researchers of distant, often rural, cultures and societies. Some of the earliest examples of urban ethnography are found in the work of the Chicago School of Sociology during the 1920s and 1930s.

Sue Heath, Rachel Brooks, Elizabeth Cleaver and Eleanor Ireland (2009, 99) describe ethnography as, ‘…the study of people in naturally occurring settings by methods of data collection that capture their ordinary activities and the social meanings that are attached to these.’ Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1995, 1ff) suggest that it can be viewed as the ‘most basic’ and least invasive form of social research and that it is an attempt to explore the ways in which people interpret their own experience. Ethnography therefore includes but moves beyond, description to the interpretation of living communities. Three key elements encapsulate the ethnographic method: documenting experience, articulating experience and interpreting experience. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 9-10) suggest that the role of the ethnographer is that of ‘stranger’, ‘…through marginality, in social position and perspective, it is possible to construct an account of the culture under investigation that both understands it from within and captures it as external to, and independent of, the researcher.’ The search is for a faithful description rather than a set of ‘universal laws’ which can falsely simplify social complexity. A key aim within this research project will be to explore and understand the hidden stories that reveal the ways in which excluded urban youth use and interpret implicit and explicit religious discourse.

The inductive approach to research espoused within the ‘Grounded Theory’ initially developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and articulated more recently by Kathy Charmaz (2006) represents an important theoretical and methodological strand within Ethnography. Its emphasis on the importance of building a theory exclusively on the basis of empirical research inverts a positivist approach whereby the researcher enters the field with a pre-existing hypothesis that she/he then tests. The emphasis within Grounded Theory is on allowing the context to reveal itself within the practice of fieldwork. Within this research project this ‘bottom-up’ approach will enable analysis and reflection to arise from the religious discourse articulated by urban youth themselves and will be aided by a use of Pinn’s (1991) ‘nitty-gritty hermeneutics’.

**Reflexivity and Standpoint**

Whilst the approach advocated by Grounded Theory will help to guard against the imposition of the researchers conclusions onto the groups of urban youth with whom I will work it is important to question the central thesis of Grounded Theory: that it is possible to approach a field-project in a completely ‘neutral’ manner. Research is shaped by the values, reflexivity and standpoint of the
researcher. Linda Finley and Brenda Gough (2003, 1) suggest that ‘...reflexivity is a defining feature of human consciousness in a postmodern world.’ Reflexivity here refers to individual introspection, inter-subjective reflection and social critique. Finley and Gough (2003, 5) argue that the increasing recognition that the subjective reflexivity of the researcher has become one of the defining features of qualitative research, representing a challenge to positivistic research assumptions about neutrality/objectivity. Allied to the importance of reflexivity in research is the standpoint from which a researcher acts. Standpoint Theory, which has been connected to Feminist/Womanist social analysis (Patricia Collins-Hill, 1998 and Sandra Harding, 2004 for example), suggests that the social experience and ideological commitments of the researcher provide the epistemological lens and hermeneutical approach through which fieldwork is seen.

The foundational importance of Action Research within this research project, the importance of standpoint and reflexivity will all be used to inform my use of Ethnography and Grounded Theory within forthcoming fieldwork. Furthermore, it will be important to recognise the influence that the ‘Foundational Values’ outlined in the accompanying ‘Theoretical Framework’ paper will have on the approach to fieldwork. In light of these values fieldwork will proceed in a critical ‘Grounded’ fashion that allows the context to ‘speak’ in a manner that can be correlated with these ‘Foundational Values’.

**Establishing a Research Model**

It is on the basis of these preliminary reflections and my commitment to an Action Research paradigm that an Ethnographic research model will be established. It should be recognised that due to the central focus on a comparison between the use of religious discourse by excluded urban youth within three youth projects in Birmingham and a later international comparison with similar projects in New York the ethnographic studies that emerge will not attain the depth of classical ethnographies that find their focus in a single community or group. However, the tools and approach exemplified by Ethnography will enable the most naturalistic picture to emerge. When set alongside the stance found within Action Research this approach will provide the most effective form of qualitative fieldwork.

Below I have outlined the cyclical shape of the Ethnographic research model that will be used within the project. Prior to ‘entering the field’ it will be necessary to establish a range of initial research questions that arise from the guiding Aims of the research project and pre-fieldwork ‘Community Profiles’. Such profiles will focus on a range of ten social markers: physical setting,
demographics (population size, ethnicity, gender, age, distributions, birth and death rates), history (major events, historical development of communities, key issues), political context/themes (parties, representatives, diversity, local dominance), education (schools, colleges, community education), economic life (key industries/sectors, employment levels, wages), ethnicity/Religion, inter-community relations, living standards (housing, car ownership, health indicators, environment...), built environment, local facilities and spaces for recreation (public and private). These ‘Community Profiles’ will provide a tight snapshot of each fieldwork context. However it will also be recognised that wider social settings and processes impact upon each narrow fieldwork setting, such as the translocal character of youth cultures and the glocal nature of urban communities. Attention to this double local/global context will inform, but nor define fieldwork which will take the following cyclical shape (adapted from Gobo, 2008, 86):
Within this research project the 3 youth projects in Birmingham will be seen as ‘units of observation’. Together, given the diversity of these groups, they form a ‘representative sample’ that illustrates the pattern of work with excluded youth in the city. This fieldwork sampling reflects a purposive choice that reflects the Aims of the research project: to learn about the relationship between social exclusion and the use of religious discourse amongst urban youth. This extended fieldwork will be set alongside a study of comparable projects in New York U.S.A to offer an international perspective to the research project.

**Into the ‘Field’**

**Entry**

1. Gaining permission.
2. Identifying formal and informal ‘gatekeepers’ who can enable/block access
3. Recognising the interests of the gatekeepers who can mould the shape that fieldwork takes and influence conclusions.
4. Establishing and sharing clear timetable for fieldwork, including an ‘end-date’.
5. Noting first impressions.
6. Recognising the importance of recognising and responding to possible hostility or suspicion of group possibly as a result of bad previous experiences.

**Mid-Point**

1. Sharpening focus, reviewing project aims
2. 1-1 interviews/focus groups
3. Participant Observation
4. Fieldwork diary – Narrative is data
5. Themed fieldwork notes
6. Tape recording important where focus is on specific discourse
7. Place within field to retreat to reflect/write
8. Quotations (need specific permission to use these)
10. Photographs/images important

**Exit**

1. Clear departure point – mark it
2. Feedback to group(s)
3. Allow group(s) to critique researchers feedback >> re-write notes in light of feedback
4. Say thank you and goodbye
5. Write up

Fieldwork Tools

Participant Observation
Ann Gray (2003, 82) suggests that ethnography and participant observation are interchangeable terms. Participant Observation offers a natural but structured way for the researcher to learn through ‘being around’. The approach raises key questions for the researcher: To what extent can I be an observer if I am a participant? Am I taking unfair advantage of relationships for the purposes of research? Is my presence honest? How do ethical questions such as confidentiality square with Participant Observation? How can I remain distant enough from the group to be an effective researcher? Participant observation represents the marriage of outsider and insider…a balance between familiarity and strangeness and ranges from informal observation to the active participation in formal and informal group activities.

Types of Participation and Observation

(Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, 104)

Kathleen and Billie Dewalt outline five similar expressions of Participant Observation:

• Non-participation (accessing information from outside a context...no primary engagement)
• Passive-participation (researcher in the community as pure observer/'spectator')
• Moderate participation (researcher identified as such, structured but peripheral participation)
• Active participation (researcher participates in most group activities)
• Complete participation (researcher becomes full member of group)

They suggest that the Participant Observer becomes a ‘vulnerable observer’ (2002, 24); someone who is open enough to the context that she/he studies to learn from fieldwork partners, but detached enough to retain an analytical independence. Herein, they suggest, lies the tension at the heart of ethnography, ‘Participant observation is a paradox because the ethnographer seeks to understand the native’s viewpoint, but not ‘go native’.’ (2002, 24)

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes provide a central interpretive tool within Participant Observation and are aimed at capturing the sense of experiences, places, events, situations, conversations and encounters:

1. Dates
2. As soon as possible after event
3. Awareness of context and attitude to note-taking….find private space.
4. As much detail as possible: descriptive snapshot
5. Current
6. Make quotations clear but do not use without permission
7. Include key factors: who present, where event took place, purpose/style of event
8. Notes about methodology
9. Key themes, reflections, questions that arise in the field
10. Theoretical/analytical reflections
11. Regular reviewing of fieldnotes

Fieldwork Diary

1. Dates
2. Impressionistic
3. More reflective…internal dialogue
4. Encompasses analytic notes
5. Initially chronological
6. Can be themed….divided up [cards/different documents]
7. Coding according to theme/group/language/setting
Documents

Can offer alternative perspectives and depictions of the context (formal internal paperwork to public documents [e.g. Annual Reports] and informal documents like diaries, rotas, flyers). Such documentation needs to be contextualised [who written by, why, who for, style…]

Analysis

- **Indexing** – See Outline of Cultural Themes [OCM] (Human Relations Area Files Inc, 2004, [http://www.yale.edu/hraf/Ocm_xml/newOcm.xml](http://www.yale.edu/hraf/Ocm_xml/newOcm.xml)) - Hundred of codes/themes for fieldwork analysis...including demographics, cultural trends, geography, language, communication, drink/drugs, clothing, housing, work, living standards, recreation, arts, entertainment, social class, ethics, friendship, family, citizenship, politics, social problems, health, sexuality, religion....
- **Coding**: fieldnotes by theme, occurrence of keywords, area, age....
- **Use of Flowcharts** to map the relationship of ideas, themes and findings to facilitate critical questioning.
- **Typologies**: the classification of strands within fieldwork along characteristic lines to act as a means of comparison and contrast of ‘typical’ themes or characteristics. These could be cautiously used to set youth projects alongside one another whilst being aware of the dangers of essentialism.
- **Triangulation**: critical bringing together of fieldnotes, interview data, documents and observation to ‘test’ findings against each other.

Interviews

Narrative in a variety of forms will provide crucial research data, allowing youth to ‘tell their story’ themselves in the manner that is most appropriate. Interviews, conversations, focus groups, informal conversations and participant observation will provide a variety of forms of narrative which will be used to feed into the exploration and examination of potential relationship between social exclusion and the use made by urban youth of implicit and explicit religious discourse. Key interpretive tools will be found within Discourse Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Reception Studies and Social Semiotics. Key questions will be asked of the narratives shared: Who is telling this story? What purpose might it serve? What is the standpoint of the storyteller? How might it relate to wider socio-cultural narratives?

Comparative Sociological method will be used to explore the possible inter-subjective and intra-contextual potential of narrative -->to act as bridging reflections between youth projects.
Interviewing Continuum

Conversation ↔ Unstructured interview ↔ Semi-structured interview ↔ Structured Interview ↔ Questionnaires

Within this project the primary interview technique will be that of semi-structured interviews where key themes and introductory questions are established prior to the interview but where these act as primers for the interviewee to speak more widely and as stimuli for further detailed comment. An emphasis will be placed on information gathering and open/non-directive questions and a conversational style which, whilst not removing the ‘power dynamic’ of the interview process can partially militate against it. Such an approach will seek to encourage those who are interviewed to see themselves as active ‘conversation partners’ and not passive interviewees. The semi-structured interview will not primarily seek ‘hard data’ but the experiential knowledge of the ‘conversation partner’.

Key Skills:

- Sensitivity re setting up the interview (location, written permission, cultural/gender sensitivities)
- Active listening
- Sensitive silence
- Consensual
- Open questions
- Information gatherers
- Prompts...’tell me more’
- Repeating answers as feedback/check
- Positive conclusion (‘Thanks’, ‘I enjoyed our conversation’, ‘Let’s talk again soon...’)

Focus Groups

1. Enables move away from individualised reflection and properly limits power of the interviewer whilst empowering youth.
3. Allows knowledge to arise through interaction.
4. Need to recognise impact of peer pressure within focus groups which can disempower some.

Asking Questions of Ethnography

The use of Ethnography within this research project will be cognizant of a range of critical questions that have been levelled at its use. It will be important, for example to be aware of the following questions:

1. How far are Ethnographies naturalistic presentations of the field and how far are they representative of the standpoint of the researcher?
2. Can the context specific nature of Ethnographic fieldwork provide insights that are transferable to other comparable contexts?

3. If knowledge is socially constructed how far is it possible for an ‘outsider’ to understand and adequately represent the vibrancy of cultures that are not their own?

4. Given its emphasis on naturalistic representation can traditional Ethnographies provide an adequate basis for action-oriented research projects?

5. How far can Ethnographic studies represent the fluidity of dynamic and plural communities?

How can ethnography be judged? (Hammersley, 1992, pp62-64)

1. Does it offer a conceptual framework that can be applied in other situations?
2. Does it offer a new/original representation of a situation/context/theme?
3. Is it grounded in ‘real’ events?
4. Does it offer a ‘thin’ or a ‘thick’ picture of a context/group/culture?
5. Does it offer a picture that is credible to those whose experience has been studied?
6. Does it move beyond description to draw out reflexive conclusions/concepts/theories?
7. Do empirical and conceptual elements co-exist?

‘Conventional’ and ‘Critical’ Ethnography

Conventional ethnography seeks to express a setting. Critical ethnography [cf critical theory] seeks to theorise a setting for the purposes of empowerment. Jim Thomas (1993, 4) ‘Conventional ethnographers study culture for the purpose of describing it; critical ethnographers do so to change it.’ More recently D. Soyini Madison (2005, 5) has made a similar point, ‘Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain.’ Critical ethnography, she suggests, disrupts the status quo and moves from ‘what is’ to ‘what could be’. It is worth asking however if the critical ethnographer’s (and action researcher’s) personal standpoint subverts the freedom of groups/communities to define themselves. Do critical ethnographers represent just another face of domination, albeit from a progressive perspective? Madison suggests that a proactive commitment to a mutual dialogue with ‘the other’ and to critical reflexivity on the part of the ethnographer (positionality) can militate against this potential danger.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis represents a broad field of study that is devoted to understanding the form, meaning and purpose of the whole range of human discourse, from the written word and conversation through to music, film and symbolic communication. Within this research project
discourse analysis will be used to analyse the form and use of implicit and explicit religious discourse by excluded urban youth. The primary focus will not be on language as an abstract system but on what people mean and understand through their use of a variety of forms of discourse: i.e. it’s existential and social meanings. Barbara Johnstone (2008, 33) points to the existential importance of discourse within human life, ‘…discourse both reflects and creates human beings’ worldviews. People bring worlds into being by talking, writing and signing.’ (2008, 33) She (2008, 10) highlights six faces of human discourse:

1. Discourse is shaped by the world and shapes the world
2. Discourse is shaped by language and shapes language
3. Discourse is shaped by participants and shapes participants
4. Discourse is shaped by prior discourse and shapes future discourse
5. Discourse is shaped by the medium that is utilised
6. Discourse is shaped by its original purpose and shapes possible future purposes

Michel Foucault (1972) explores the nature of human knowledge, resisting ideas that it is either an autonomous system or a structurally determined form of communication, as in the work of figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure. For Foucault human discourse should be seen as a form of historically situated knowledge, designed to express specific contextualised truths. In this sense human discourse can in some senses be seen as a reflection on (and of) power relations. Within this project discourse will be seen in individual and communal terms as an expression of such contextualised ‘truth’. Whilst the character of the discourse will be interrogated the primary purpose of my discourse analysis will be to examine its existential significance in the lives of excluded urban youth. Hence, key questions will include:

- What form does the discourse take?
- Who is speaking and in what circumstances?
- Is this a ‘story’ that confirms or subverts received religious discourse?
- Does this ‘story’ relate to wider youth discourse or wider religious discourse?
- How might a discourse reflect or react against existing cultural discourse?
- What is the purpose of the discourse in relation to individuals and communities?
- What ‘message’ does it impart and to whom (here the use of semiotics will be important)?
- How might an ‘audience’ infer meaning from the discourse?
Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis relates to the work of Foucault and has been most thoroughly developed by Norman Fairclough (1992, 1999). The approach suggests that discourse is embedded in social practices and relations and revolves around an analysis of ‘text’, discursive practice and the placement of the discourse within wider socio-cultural practices and discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis therefore makes it possible to engage with social and cultural change as examples of discourses that arise from and relate to contemporary patterns of urban life. The discourse utilised by urban youth within this project will be set alongside such ‘meta’-political/cultural discourse. For example discourse about belonging, plurality, identity, public space and so-called anti social behaviour amongst some urban youth will provide an important backdrop to the use of implicit and explicit religious discourse by particular groups of urban youth in specific local contexts. Central to the use of Critical Discourse Analysis is a neo-Marxist focus on the nature of ideology as a means by which those with power elicit a form of false consciousness amongst those who are powerless, leading to a form of hegemony whereby this situation is accepted as the norm. In the context of this research project it will be important to explore the ways in which power is understood and exercised amongst urban youth and the extent to which their own discourse engages in a critical manner with the social, political and religious discourse that they may have inherited (and possibly rejected).

In practice the use of Critical Discourse Analysis within this project will seek to adopt the following form:

1. Analysis of the ‘text’ of the discourse in its own right as used by individuals/groups. Here the use of semiotics and social semiotics will be useful.
2. Identification of key themes present within the discourse in relation to wider discourse on similar themes within the local community/religious grouping.
3. Establishment of loose typologies to summarise 1 + 2
4. Dialogue between original discourse and wider socio-cultural or political discourse.
5. Identification of mechanisms of power, influence and ideology on the discourse as used by youth and its relationship to observed patterns of social exclusion
6. Reflective meeting with urban youth to discuss analysis of discourse
7. Shared identification of implicit and explicit religious discourse within the discourse.

‘Dub Practice’

Dub practice, which emerged out of Jamaican dancehall, has the potential to resource a new theological method within urban theology and provides underused interpretive tools which can be utilised in the analysis of the religious discourse employed by urban youth within this project. Dub is characterised by the stripping bare of a song to leave only the track’s core components which
provide a template upon which DJ’s are able to fashion new socio-cultural commentaries. Dub practice is currently an untapped resource within British urban theology, although the Black-British theologian Robert Beckford (2006) has begun to explore the idea in his most recent work. Beckford portrays dub practice as an act of emancipatory deconstruction-reconstruction. Dominant sounds, narratives and values are deconstructed so that an alternative liberative musical form can be constructed. Beckford (2006, 67) summarises, ‘Dub is more than a musical technique: it is also a quest for meaning.’ Within this Research Project dub practice will be used to sharpen analysis of the implicit and explicit religious discourses which are employed by excluded urban youth. This ‘urban dub’ will be used as a method of analysing and deconstructing this experience and its relationship to implicit/explicit religion. Once this process of deconstruction has taken place, an ‘urban dub’ will begin the process of transformative reconstruction drawing on the discipline of semiotics to construct urban ontological symbols which can help to express the narratives of meaning and truth which engage with the experience and cultural world of urban youth as a first step towards the construction of an urban youth theology.

**Theological Tools**

**Contextual Theology**

Contextual Theology, which can be compared to the ‘see-judge-act’ methodology developed by the Belgian priest Joseph Cardijn, represents a paradigm shift in Christian theology as Stephen Bevans (1994) demonstrates. Dominant theologies have drawn upon the Bible, tradition and reason as controlling sources for universalised reflection and have sought to apply ruling themes and doctrines to specific situations. Contextual theology inverts this process through the adoption of a four stage hermeneutical circle or pastoral cycle. The practice of contextual theology begins with experience, which is seen to be a valid point of departure for theological reflection. Secondly contextual theologians seek to understand the context which gives rise to experience through a process of socio-cultural analysis. Thirdly, experience and social analysis are brought into a dialogue with existing Christian, Biblical and theological traditions to provide the foundation for contextualised theological reflection, which enables a new hermeneutical perspective to emerge. Fourthly, the cycle returns to praxis and invites a response, holding action and reflection together within the circle of theological reflection.

The classical articulation of contextual theological method within liberation theology is seen in the work of Segundo. His hermeneutical circle is rooted in a hermeneutics of suspicion whereby all political, economic, cultural, religious and theological systems are interrogated to uncover their relationship to hegemonic structures of oppression. Drawing on the hermeneutical circle articulated
by Juan-Luis Segundo (1975) the British urban theologian Laurie Green (1990) has developed a ‘doing theology spiral’. The model is presented as a spiral and not the more familiar circle because, as Green recognises, exploration, reflection and response lead into new situations and the further unfolding of the spiral. Green’s ‘doing theology’ spiral will guide the theological methodology of this Research Project and will be used to begin the articulation of an inter-faith and cross-cultural Urban Youth Theology, in partnership with the youth who participate in the project.

![‘Doing Theology’ Spiral: Laurie Green (1990)](image)

**Third Space Theology**

The emerging significance of ‘third space theology’ is a reflection of the increasing interwoven and fluid nature of urban life in Britain. Drawing on a key architect of third space theory, Homi Bhabha (1994), Chris Baker (2007, 16) describes the third space as, ‘...the space produced by the collapse of the previously defining narratives of modernity based on colonialism, class and patriarchy.’ This is an in-between location which is characterised by fluidity, uncertainty, dialogue, instability and difference. The hybrid third space within urban Britain which is forged in the gaps between fixed communities can be seen as a locus from which submerged narratives can emerge. As Baker (2007, 19) points out, ‘Within our postmodern culture we now have stories, theories, cultures and urban spaces that are fusions of gender, sexuality and different degrees of mobility as well as race, culture and ethnic identity.’ This third space, which has become a critical creative locus within urban music, provides the blurred context within which fieldwork will be set and the socio-cultural backdrop to the youth discourse that this project will explore. This Research Project will draw on such ‘third space’ reflection as a way of engaging with the blurred, intra-contextual and provisional nature of urban youth experience and spirituality.
Fitting it all together

Urban Youth Contextual Theology

Discourse Analysis and Semiotics

Ethnography (3 Youth Projects)

Action Research

Foundational Aims

Interviews
Participant Observation
Focus Groups

Reflexivity
Standpoint
References


Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).


Martyn Hammersley, What’s Wrong with Ethnography? (London: Routledge, 1992)


