

Integrating Global Religion into a Research Methods Class

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The materials that follow suggest a number of practical ways to teach about global religion in the context of an undergraduate research methods class. Materials are purposely varied in the hopes that some of them will be useful in methods classes that prioritize different learning objectives. The learning goals for each exercise are included as are readings that can provide instructors or students additional substantive background information.

Exercise 1: Reading and Interpreting Tables

By the end of this exercise, students will have practiced reading and interpreting tables and learned something about the largest religious groups or global restrictions on religion around the world in the process. For substantive background, instructors might review any of the reports on aspects of global religion available on the website of the Pew Research Center around [Global Attitudes and Trends](#).

To help students practicing reading and interpreting data learn something about global aspects of religion, instructors can select a recent Pew Report they think will be of most interest. By way of example, an instructor might pick the 2019 report [A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World](#). Student could be asked to review parts of the report before coming to class or could be asked in pairs or small groups in class to answer a set of questions based on data and tables available in the report. This kind of an approach helps students practice reading tables and think about the assumptions embedded in how questions are asked, scales are constructed, etc.

Exercise 2. Constructing Survey Measures

Building on Exercise 1, instructors teaching units about how to conceptualize and measure concepts can have students work with the same Pew Report to consider various approaches. To continue with the same example, using the 2019 [A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World](#), instructors could pair the reading of one or more appendices with substantive articles about these concepts or – better – methodological articles about how to operationalize and measure using the appendices as examples.

Exercise 3. The Article X-Ray

I start research methods courses by having students do what I call an article x-ray or an exercise in taking apart a sociological research article to see what its parts are in a way that gets at the underlying assumptions, research design choices, approaches to measuring concepts, etc. I often have students read an article and then we do this x-ray of the article together as a class in class. I then have the first graded assignment of the course ask students to do this again on one of a few articles. I tell them that I am “throwing them in the deep end” by asking them to read a research

article and that they don't need to understand all aspects of it to be able to answer these questions.

The questions I use for the article x-ray include some combination of the following:

1. What is the author's research question (i.e. what does she want to know)?
2. Why is that an important question?
 - a. What is the empirical motivation (i.e. how is the question informed by things going on in the world?)
 - b. What is the theoretical motivation (i.e. how is the question informed by things other scholars have written?)
3. How did the author gather data to answer her research question (i.e. what were her research methods?)
4. What is the unit of analysis?
5. What are her central arguments?
6. Is the author making a causal argument or not?

In the written assignment, I also ask the students to spend at least one page answering several of the following questions

- How would you evaluate this paper?
- Does the research design allow the author to address his or her question?
- Is the data well collected?
- Are you convinced by the author's argument? Why or why not?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this article overall?

Articles about global religion that would be good candidates for the article x-ray include:

Hsu, Becky, Weiwei Zhang, and Christine Kim. "Surveying Happiness in China: Comparing Measures of Subjective Well-Being." *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 4:14.

Rinaldo, Rachel. 2019. "Obedience and Authority among Muslim Couples: Negotiating Gendered Religious Scripts in Contemporary Indonesia." *Sociology of Religion* 80(3): 323-349.

Rinaldo, Rachel. 2014. "Pious and Critical: Muslim Women Activists and the Question of Agency." *Gender & Society* 28(6): 824-846.

Exercise 4. Fieldwork in Global Religious Contexts

To help students think about participant observation and interviews including issues of access, writing interview guides, positioning in the field, and analyzing qualitative data, an instructor might assign the methods appendix of one or more book length studies of aspects of global religion. Paired with central texts in teaching qualitative methodologies, these appendices provide examples and could help students complete assignments including drafting an interview guide or reflecting on their own and other researchers positionality in the field. Recent book length studies with appendices that might be helpful include:

Hsu, Becky. 2019. *Happiness in China: Social Relationships and the Making of a Good Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Clevenger, Casey. 2020. *Unequal Partners: In Search of Transnational Catholic Sisterhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The methods texts to pair with these books:

Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c.3 Writing Up Fieldnotes I: From Field to Desk)

Weiss, Robert. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press