

Paper

Our Reality is Our Thought

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Abstract

This paper draws together academic theories related to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s revolutionary statement, “the reality of man is his thought, not his material body”. It describes research into collective thought from the fields of communication, political science, psychology, economics, sociology and philosophy and discusses theories about collective consciousness, communication, culture and identity through the lens of Bahá’í teachings. The value of using qualitative research procedures is discussed, followed by a description of studying the elusive phenomenon of thought and how employing these procedures ultimately depends on the research question being asked.

Introduction

With the advent of each of the Manifestations of God, astonishing progress was attained in the realm of human minds, thoughts, and spirits. Consider, for example, the progress that has been achieved in this divine age in the world of minds and thoughts.¹

Bahá’u’lláh says that one must, “before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.”² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates on this theme saying that,

The first teaching of Bahá’u’lláh is the duty incumbent upon all to investigate reality. What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must forget all hearsay and examine truth himself, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not.³

Wherever he finds truth or reality, he must hold to it, forsaking, discarding all else; for outside of reality there is naught but superstition and imagination.⁴

Elsewhere Bahá’u’lláh says that mental faculties are “inherent properties of the soul, even as the radiation of light is the essential property of the sun.”⁵

¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2014), pp. 185–186.

² Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1950), pp. 191–200.

³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 372.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 61–64.

⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘Tablet to Dr. Auguste Forel’, *The Bahá’í World*, XV (1921), p. 37.

Studying Thought and Examining Culture

This paper discusses perspectives from scholarly research to investigate the notion that our reality is our thought, incorporating perspectives from the Bahá'í writings, challenging the predominant view that the thought generator is the brain rather than spirit. Although our private thoughts are unique to ourselves, I will take into account how ideas shared among family, friends, institutions, media and one's affinity groups merge into what's often called a "collective consciousness," a term suggesting the subordination of independent investigation of truth to a popular consensus.

Consider how individuals may cling to objects and practices which they think define human reality. For example, in essentially every society, children share language, history, values, beliefs, and behaviours with their families.⁶ We acculturate into family rituals and embrace certain perspectives and behaviours, often collectively with neighbours, friends, schools, media and so on, who share similar ideas and feelings which they may unquestionably accept as fact. As we come to identify with such a collection of ideas, we tend to think of it as a culture without perceiving that these ideas really exist in our individual minds. Thus, a culture is actually a system of meaning built upon beliefs and values held in common.

We do not create meaning in isolation but in collaboration with others as well as being prompted by social structures — government, law, school etc. — which influence collective thought. Between the two world wars, critical theory emerged as a school of thought that analyses systemic power relationships existing within these social structures⁷, showing how culture is not without prejudice in its construction. Instead, the concept of dominant culture persists. To illustrate what that looks like, consider that the United States is predominantly Christian for whom Christmas is its biggest celebration. Even people who are not Christian might say, "Happy holidays" in December, but it is usually implied that they mean Merry Christmas, or perhaps happy Hanukkah, and Jews have found a way to parallel Hanukkah with Christmas. Despite how multicultural the United States or Canada may seem, there is a predominant national identity where the dominant culture has evolved, moulded by shared history and viewed through lenses not dissimilar from those used by the nation's founders. US citizens tell themselves stories about who they are — living in a land of opportunity where all men are created equal, anyone can grow up to become president, *e pluribus unum*.

When the dominant culture in Italy became totalitarian in the 1920s, Antonio Gramsci, a fierce critic of fascism, was arrested by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's regime and imprisoned until his death eleven years later. His incarceration was meant to suppress his political influence: His prosecutors asserted that, "We must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years."⁸ Gramsci wrote thirty notebooks regarding the mental imprisonment imposed by a class system, developing the theory of hegemony which describes how the ruling classes are able to manufacture consent from the lower classes who internalise the values of the wealthy, supposing that by so doing they share the intellectual and moral leadership of the powerful.⁹ He wrote, "Even ways of

⁶ G. W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979).

⁷ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ P. Ives, 'The Mammoth Task of Translating Gramsci', in *Rethinking Marxism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 15–22.

⁹ John D'Attoma, 'Hegemony or Dominance? A Gramscian Analysis of US Ascendancy', *Critique: A Worldwide Journal of Politics* (2011), pp. 1–14.

thinking are acquired and not innate..."¹⁰ Further, he describes how the values of the dominant, wealthy, powerful rulers are conveyed through an ideological superstructure comprising legal and educational systems, religious organisations, media, family and cultural institutions, all of which normalise values of the ruling classes. This dynamic suggests that lower classes regard the ideas of the powerful to be what society says is true and, without examining whether these values have merit, bow to ideas which essentially constrain them.

The mental construct of culture — comprising a shared set of beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts which characterise a group or society and passed down through generations — may affect our individual thought. Culture acts as a guide for daily life including language, food, clothing, and social norms, and is constantly evolving, learned and internalised. It also encompasses societies' collective notions and behaviours.

Collective thought has been examined through several different lenses. For one, French sociologist Émile Durkheim sees society as an “aggregate of individuals” with an “inborn right to live and not be obstructed.”¹¹ He assigned the label “collective conscience” — also known as “collective consciousness” — to indicate a “set of collective beliefs and values upon which the continuity of social life depends.”¹² It comprises the shared ideals, beliefs and moral standards which societal members hold in common¹³ and which Durkheim deems a “tyranny”¹⁴ inasmuch as “the individual consciousness very often merely reflects the underlying condition of the organism [the state]”¹⁵ He concedes that, “it was natural to extend this conception to collective psychology.”¹⁶ The term collective conscience describes the social pressure to accept — often unconsciously — the dominant topics, routines, practices, thoughts and behaviours among family, friends, institutions and media which are considered to be common knowledge in their societies. Thus, whereas Gramsci notes that pressures to conform one's thought originates in the values of the ruling classes, Durkheim affirms how such values become widely accepted through a population's mutual reinforcement.

Guo-ming Chen has further conceptualised cultural identity as “the collective consciousness of a group based on the use of common symbols and the co-creation of shared meanings among its members.”¹⁷ You could show visitors popular events, foods, and places, but you cannot show them your culture which is a mental construct of attitudes, history, philosophies, and shared perspectives of the world which we communicate with our compatriots. Within any culture, each symbol, like words in the dictionary, relates to every other symbol, pervading all aspects of how members of a given society think, behave, talk, and share ideas, practices, experiences, beliefs, norms, gestures, and attitudes which guide human behaviour. It is useful to conceptualise culture

¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), p. 383.

¹¹ Anthony Gibbons, ed., *Durkheim on Politics and the State* (Redwood, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Emile Durkheim, *Division of Labour in Society* (1893), trans. by W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1997), pp. 79–80.

¹⁴ Gibbons, *Durkheim on Politics and the State*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 133.

¹⁶ Durkheim, *Division of Labour in Society*, pp. 79–80.

¹⁷ G. M. Chen, ‘Cultural Identity’, in *International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication*, ed. by Y. Y. Kim (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783665.ieicc0036>.

first as thought and secondly as action: Outward activities can be seen as symbolic and indicative of beliefs and values.

Thus culture is a system of meaning built upon beliefs and values held in common. To introduce this concept — the sense of belonging to a specific group — to my undergraduate students, I would ask them to imagine themselves alone on a desert island: With no one to interact and share meanings with, how would you know what kind of person you are? How would you know if you were kind, generous, honest, cantankerous or anything else? Would you be able to know if your true self had changed? This helped them to realise that their actual sense of self — their identity — is internal. Two group processes — perceived similarity and association — work to reinforce one's identity as a group member.¹⁸ By detailing how shared ideas turn into predictable cultural behaviour and abstract meanings harden into enforced social rules, Isaiah Berlin highlights some consequences of what happens when a culture obeys those rules rather than choosing to transcend them as well as any other unjust restrictions imposed by governments.¹⁹

Identity comprises the notion that attributes and mutual beliefs determine descriptions of everyone's personal self. Identities are "always in process, always in a relative state of formation."²⁰ Ironically, the idea of a personal identity is generally used to indicate similarities among people who share material attributes such as country of origin, skin colour, sex, socioeconomic status, geography, as well as religious affiliations.

Language is a symbol system which can be seen as a universe of shared meaning within a culture. Besides language, members of cultures also learn the meanings of symbols. In 1890s USA, philosopher and logician Charles Peirce (1839–1914) developed the theory of semiotics, which describes the arbitrary nature of an object and its descriptor.²¹ That is, we learn what symbols are supposed to represent by habit rather than through any resemblance to their assigned name. Semiotics looks at human culture as not existing in the world of the senses, but in the diverse outward activities of peoples — their food, entertainment, religions, laws, family structures, etc. For example, the popular sport of American football illustrates the complexity of ideas surrounding a cultural event. The game involves tactical skill, organisation, strength and power. It is also a battle between rivals. Its spectacle includes the country's flag. Its national anthem symbolises the patriotism and fraternity among both teams. Fans proudly cheer their teams, especially when they win. Similar sets of values exist in any culture.

Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interaction says that meanings arise out of our interactions — they exist not in things, not in individuals, but among groups and cultural members.²² Together we agree on what symbols mean — a five-pointed star, a cow, an X, a dog: Two of these examples exist in nature and take on different meanings in different culture systems. Symbols build upon one another, like the objects to which they are attached, creating complete

¹⁸ M. H. Wright, 'Burkeian and Freudian Theories of Identification', *Communication Quarterly*, 42.3 (1994), pp. 301–310.

¹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²⁰ A. Rattansi and A. Phoenix, 'Rethinking Youth Identities: Modernist and Postmodernist Frameworks', *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 5.2 (2005), p. 9.

²¹ James Hoopes, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

²¹ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 4.

²² Ibid.

environments. They are fundamental to human culture and remain hidden in plain sight like the air we breathe. We dwell among symbols of all sorts and rarely think about what some of them mean — the shapes and styles of our homes and cities, our clothes, all the visible ways we organise our lives contain meanings which we learn, usually unconsciously. Blumer says this involves an interpretive process and “arises in the process of interaction.”²³

Further, anthropologist James Fernandez maintains that,

culture is integrated, providing us with a sensation of wholeness. And perhaps the best index of cultural integration or disintegration, or of genuineness or spuriousness in culture, for that matter, is the degree to which men can feel the aptness of each other's metaphors.²⁴

What all this points to...is the importance of the analysis of metaphors in anthropological inquiry. In fact, the analysis of metaphor, it seems to me, is the very nature of that inquiry.²⁵

Having presented the topics of collective consciousness, culture, identity and communication through a psychological, intellectual or behaviourist lens, the challenge is to view these topics through a spiritual lens. The theories mentioned above examine how language and symbols influence our thoughts which often connect with our values and influence our behaviours. Where Gramsci identifies the power of a ruling class as the authority over a population, Durkheim considers how collective thinking may not have a single identifiable origin.

In contrast to pure intellectual reasoning, Bahá'u'lláh counsels us to reject ideas which are not rooted in spiritual reality. Indeed, each divine Manifestation of God throughout the ages — Bahá'u'lláh being the most recent — has updated social teachings and expounded spiritual teachings, charging Their followers to deepen their understanding of the purpose of our mortal lives and to avoid blind imitation. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that, with the coming of a new divine Messenger, the world of thought is regenerated and “extraordinary progress occurs in minds, thoughts and spirits.”²⁶ As a point of reference, Bahá'u'lláh's *Hidden Words*²⁷ encourages us to see ourselves as spiritual beings apart from any material identifications. That is, reality itself is not material but spiritual; the same can be said for our collectively shared reality, our culture. In fact, Durkheim intuits that, “it is from religion that have emerged...all the other manifestations of collective activity — law, morality, art, science, political forms, etc. In the beginning everything was religious.”²⁸

Unexamined thoughts existing within a culture or group which are often not rooted in spiritual reality are labelled by Bahá'u'lláh as “idle fancies” and “vain imaginings.” As described by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá,

Through our ignorance and lack of viewpoint we divide this common home, we divide the members of this family into various races, we divide religion into different sects and then with those suppositional divisions we wage war against one another; we shed one another's

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ J. W. Fernandez, ‘Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Every Body ... and the Metaphors of Everyman’, *Daedalus* 101.1 (1972), p. 58.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁶ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 163.

²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994).

²⁸ Gibbons, *Durkheim on Politics and the State*, p. 135.

blood and we pillage one another's possessions. Is not this unpardonable ignorance? Is this not the height of injustice?²⁹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “God has created in man the power of reason, whereby man is enabled to investigate reality. God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors.”³⁰ And He warns,

The root cause of prejudice is blind imitation of the past — imitation in religion, in racial attitudes, in national bias, in politics. So long as this aping of the past persisteth, just so long will the foundations of the social order be blown to the four winds, just so long will humanity be continually exposed to direst peril.³¹

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings confront many areas in dominant culture. For instance, regarding conflict resolution, in the dominant American culture consultation is a concept where one is expected to take credit in the competitive world of work, in order to gain recognition and “get ahead.” This differs from Bahá'í approaches which instead encourage detachment from ideas as well as adhering to honesty and unity as core to the process.

Thus, culture has its inception in the revelation of a Manifestation of God:

The enlightenment of the world of thought comes from these centers of light and sources of mysteries. Without the bounty of the splendor and the instructions of these Holy Beings the world of souls and thoughts would be opaque darkness. Without the irrefutable teachings of those sources of mysteries the human world would become the pasture of animal appetites and qualities, the existence of everything would be unreal, and there would be no true life. That is why it is said in the Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word,’ meaning that it became the cause of all life.³²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá illuminates the parochial nature of cultures, saying, “Let us banish the phantasmal thoughts of East and West, North and South, European and American, English and German, Persian and French.”³³ To emphasise the estrangement which might arise among differing cultural values, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes how we should transmute negative thoughts to positive ones: “When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed by a more powerful thought of love...”³⁴ Consonant with the concept of culture existing collectively in our minds, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in *Some Answered Questions* how so much of our human experience relies on examples drawn from the world of nature to depict internal states, but cautions us not to mistake the symbol for the concept it signals. In other words, we rely on words which represent sensible phenomena to symbolise internal states and we must use concrete terms to describe abstract concepts, like “the reality of the spirit.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that human knowledge is two-fold — knowledge about what we can sense and intellectual knowledge that exists only in our minds.

²⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*, comp. by Elizabeth Fraser Chamberlain (Boston, MA: Tudor Press, 1918), p. 178.

³⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 291.

³¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 203.

³² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 162–163.

³³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*, p. 177.

³⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), pp. 29–30.

Concepts can only be understood via language. We reach agreements among ourselves about what words mean. This can be tested simply by travelling to a place of another language system and seeing how tenuous word systems are. Language gives us the ability to find the essence of solid objects and relate them to intangibles, as in “My love is like a red, red, rose”; “solid as a rock”; “strong as an ox.” As an example: When President Obama nominated Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court of the United States, discourse about this event focused on her as a woman, as of Latino heritage, as Puerto Rican, as a Democrat, a liberal, fatherless, a child who grew up poor in public housing³⁵. As in most political discussions, each symbol is used to predict her behaviour and ultimately, her character. She is not just an individual, but exists in a system of symbols.

Bahá'u'lláh's revelation has infused the world with a vast amount of spiritual teachings to prepare earth's inhabitants for new ways of thinking and behaving. He stresses the need for us to raise our quality of thought and to turn our thought into action. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “Some men and women glory in their exalted thoughts, but if these thoughts never reach the plane of action they remain useless: the power of thought is dependent on its manifestation in deeds.”³⁶ These quotes indicate the importance of learning to think through a spiritual lens rather than a material one. Reinforced by the discipline of prayer and meditation, one's mind can become detached from inherited beliefs — the opinions, behaviours and sayings of others — and check such external information against one's inner reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “Thought and theories of past ages are fruitless now... antiquated forms of belief and ancestral imitations which are at variance with the foundation of divine reality must pass away and be reformed.”³⁷ Inherited beliefs in a shared system of meanings pervade the collective consciousness whereas the divine Messengers periodically reorient and renew our focus. The premise that our reality is our thought should profoundly impact research into human thought.

How Can We Study Thought?

The harmony between the head and the heart — human intellect and spirit — is a fundamental concept in Bahá'í teachings. In the Tablet of Ahmad, Bahá'u'lláh warns, “Thus have their superstitions become veils between them and their own hearts and kept them from the path of God, the Exalted, the Great.” Bahá'ís recognise this statement as a basic Bahá'í tenet, that we all must independently investigate truth, whether it derives from religion or science. Further, according to the Bahá'í writings, “Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive”³⁸ and “Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created things embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone.”³⁹ The renowned scientist Albert Einstein contemplated the universal harmony he perceived in existence itself, noting that our limited human minds cannot grasp the workings of creation. He wrote, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”⁴⁰ Such expansive

³⁵ C. Nielsen, ‘Wise Latina: Framing Sonia Sotomayor in the General-Market and Latina/o-Oriented Prestige Press’, *Howard Journal of Communications*, 24.2 (2013), pp. 117–133.

³⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 17–18.

³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956), p. 228.

³⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 140 .

³⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ Albert Einstein, ‘Religion and Science’, *New York Times Magazine*, 9 November 1930, p. 7.

perspectives about reality can help liberate our thoughts from those ideas which circulate without adequate examination.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, psychology researchers generally have focused on Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic populations: Non-western, rural, and less industrialised populations were underrepresented in psychological research during that period.⁴¹ In the 1960s the widespread practice of conducting research on thoughts and opinions of predominantly affluent white men was challenged by a theoretical framework rooted in the premise that human experience is jointly shaped by multiple social positions (e.g. race, sex), and cannot be adequately understood by considering social positions independently.⁴² Academics noted insufficient consideration of the views of people of colour and women within sociological study. Sandra Harding, a pioneer of feminist standpoint theory⁴³, championed a feminist perspective, stressing how current methodology had outsize influence over social values — especially by socially dominant, white males. She indicated how researchers' values conceptualise their objects of study and interpret their evidence by shaping the questions they ask, as well as according to the kinds of research topics likely to receive funding and become published.

Further concerns arose among researchers who questioned the generalisability and applicability of research findings to populations other than white men.⁴⁴ Another concern was that gathering information by drawing from a population of whom the researcher is not fully informed would not enhance an understanding of internal processes.

Many researchers have been socially distant from the populations they would ideally be serving and thus have failed to draw upon the tacit or explicit knowledge that already exists in such populations; researchers often come from segments of the population that do not represent the full diversity of human insight and experience, and research has often been conducted on equally narrow segments of the population.⁴⁵

The value of the lesser-understood qualitative research approach appealed to women and underrepresented minorities during the mid-20th century. A qualitative approach typically poses questions to individuals who share a particular experience, seeking their individual feelings and experiences as opposed to forming a hypothesis and mathematically measuring respondents' self-evaluations based on preselected answers which are typical of a quantitative research approach. Qualitative inquiry draws from a number of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, ethnography, communication studies, and women's studies — as

⁴¹ A. G. Thalmayer, C. Toscanelli and J. J. Arnette, 'The Neglected 95% Revisited: Is American Psychology Becoming Less American?', *American Psychologist*, 76.1 (2020), pp. 116–129.

⁴² K. Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989). p. 239.

⁴³ Nancy Harstock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. by Sandra Harding (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁴ Marko Pitesa and Michelle J. Gelfand, 'Going beyond Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) Problems in Organizational Research', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 174 (2023), article 104212, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.104212>

⁴⁵ S. Adaikkalam Zabihi, M. Ashtiani, M. Karlberg, M. Sami and N. Toosi, 'Aspirational Trends in Social Science Methodology', *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 35.3 (September 2025), p. 18.

philosophical bases for these approaches and theories. As conceptualised by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis,

Qualitative inquiry attempts to understand, interpret, and explain complex and highly contextualized social phenomena...it always aims to demonstrate the complexity, texture and nuance involved in how individuals and groups experience themselves and their worlds. Finally, qualitative research focuses on both the meanings and the practices involved in such experiencing.⁴⁶

Language and discourse play a significant role in constructing social reality, the study of which differs from objective measurement and statistical analysis of such variables as scores, percentages, and reaction times. As previously mentioned, communities comprise humans whose values, ideas, thoughts and opinions are often held in common and their interaction produces and constructs a shared sense of an objective reality.⁴⁷ As the interview has become democratised, we no longer look to experts to learn about social phenomena but go directly to those experiencing the social phenomena themselves.⁴⁸ Thus to uncover individuals' actual experiences and feelings, we need to ask them directly. T.A. Schwandt asserts that the purpose of qualitative, interview-based research is to describe and clarify people's experiential life "as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of and accomplished by human beings."⁴⁹

Interviewing and Data Gathering

Qualitative research relies on interviews, naturalistic observations and an inductive approach to theorising. Researchers must sincerely respect their respondents as they amass the data generated in one-on-one interviews which provide the raw material necessary to answer the research questions; their approach towards their respondents should be one of curiosity and respect.⁵⁰ The research interview is not a neutral tool, but rather ferrets out meaning in specific interactions.⁵¹ Focusing on respondents' experiences supports the assumption that the world is best described by citing the internal states expressed by those who live them which ensures that the researcher is studying actual events.

The recounting of lived events allows the researcher to visualize the participant's social world and to ask questions that seek to uncover deeper layers of this world and its meaning.

⁴⁶ George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis, *On Qualitative Inquiry* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2005), p. 17.

⁴⁷ E. A. Hoffman, 'Open-Ended Interviews, Power, and Emotional Labour', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36.3 (2007), pp. 318–346.

⁴⁸ T. A. Schwandt, *Qualitative Inquiry: A Dictionary of Terms* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), p. 84.

⁴⁹ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, eds, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 1st edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

⁵⁰ S. Adaikkalam Zabihi, M. Ashtiani, M. Karlberg, M. Sami and N. Toosi, 'Aspirational Trends in Social Science Methodology', *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 35.3 (September 2025), pp. 7–44.

⁵¹ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, 1st edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

The researcher can also more readily assess the completeness and plausibility of the participant's account, thus making inconsistencies and contradictions more visible.⁵²

Some qualitative procedures use tools similar to anthropologists. The qualitative researcher approaches the study with questions rather than expectations or predictions, putting aside assumptions and biases — often referred to as bracketing one's assumptions — while searching for common experiences among the respondents.⁵³

The interview itself is a social event where interaction between interviewer and respondent can provide insight into how people's experiences construct their versions of the world.⁵⁴ The researcher needs to construct her questions in ways that do not prompt the responses, and must remain open-minded and without judgment about any responses but rather seek to fully understand them. Because qualitative researchers are committed to allowing people to speak for themselves, the interview may seem like a "collaboration"⁵⁵ or wide-ranging conversation where respondents tell their personal stories and detailed experiences. Indeed, the researcher acts as the research instrument as she interprets what respondents say, systematically seeking similarities among the responses. Thus the researcher "reaches for valuable information inside the respondent and assigns the interviewer the task of somehow extracting it..."⁵⁶ The role of researchers who are also participant-observers enhances their ability to understand respondents' lived experiences and might best be approached as a conversation in which the interviewer is curious to understand respondents' perceptions and feelings about their experiences.

The cooperative inquiry perspective holds that research is always personal and that the researcher has an "insider's perspective [which] is vital to forming an accurate appraisal of group life."⁵⁷ The researcher as participant-observer may develop a long-term trusting relationship with the observed, which is an insight inspired by the feminist ethic of caring and commitment, distinguishing this role from a purely observational project.⁵⁸

The interview is not a neutral tool, inasmuch as it produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes: the interviewer's personal characteristics affect her perspective, and her perspective adds to the reality of the interview situation. Gathering data via open-ended interviews allows for a researcher to peruse the thought processes of respondents: The researcher interprets respondents' individual representations and forms her own representation of their collective expressions. Blumer notes that "meaning arises in the process of interaction."⁵⁹ The researcher should feel free to ask new questions, skip others which do not seem to apply to a particular respondent, and reshuffle the order as necessary and actively listen in order to detect the significance of respondents' remarks. The researcher needs discipline to remain open, non-

⁵² U. Schultze and M. Avital, 'Designing Interviews to Generate Rich Data for Information Systems Research', *Information and Organization*, 21.1 (2011), p. 5.

⁵³ J. E. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein, *The New Language of Qualitative Methods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵⁴ D. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2020).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ J. E. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein, *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), p. 12.

⁵⁷ P. A. Adler and P. Adler, 'Observational Techniques', in Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, p. 380.

⁵⁸ Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

⁵⁹ Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 4.

judgmental and collaborative, which allows respondents to express their actual feelings. The researcher looks for shared meanings⁶⁰ among the responses.

Interviewers must be attuned to the idea that people's internal states are revealed in discourses and language use reveals a speaker's characteristics.⁶¹ A main theme I learned from respondents in my study, "The Same Yet Different: Creating Unity Among the Diverse Members of the Bahá'í Faith"⁶² is that in respondents' interactions with individuals they perceived as different from themselves, they wanted to understand the connections among the others' behaviours and attitudes. They felt that the conflicts in their lives arose more from personality clashes than cultural ones. They also expressed the need to recognise that communicating across cultural barriers must be consciously learned inasmuch as it helps them rid themselves of prejudices.

Because qualitative research deals with the thoughts of respondents, the end results of a study depend on the researchers' ability to make sense of the responses gathered. A goal of qualitative research is to uncover a theory which explains what the data suggest. The grounded theory approach — that is, theory supported by the data — relies on interviews, naturalistic observations and an inductive approach to theorising.⁶³ Based on the premise that truth is enacted and not external, grounded theory supposes that researchers interact with their data in order to uncover a theory — if this, then that — suggested by the data. Serious contemplation is required before a theory comes into view which contains plausible relationships among its concepts.

To effectively perform a grounded theory, the researcher must gather multiple perspectives and continue until the generic features in the data do not add anything new but replicate earlier data.⁶⁴ Besides commenting on the social reality of the setting, the researcher relates events, opinions and self-descriptions in order to supply the intended audience with the clearest picture possible.⁶⁵

Glaser and Strauss⁶⁶ conceptualised an analytical system they call the constant comparison method which involves sorting and re-sorting data, assessing and comparing data fragments, finding commonalities among the responses, scrutinising the data to locate the most salient themes, and looking for interrelationships among those themes.⁶⁷ This approach involves sorting and resorting data (i.e., the responses) into categories. It may be convenient to record statements on note cards which can be shuffled in various ways until a manageable number of comments remain which seem to best convey the universe of meaning in the data. The researcher peruses data to locate common themes, sort and re-sort them into categories and gradually narrow them down

⁶⁰ Gubrium and Holstein, *The New Language of Qualitative Methods*.

⁶¹ Edwin Black, 'The Second Persona', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 55.2 (1970), pp. 109–119.

⁶² Deborah Clark Vance, 'The Same Yet Different: Creating Unity among the Diverse Members of the Bahá'í Faith', *The Journal of Intergroup Relations*, XXIX.4 (Winter 2002/2003), National Association of Human Rights Workers [an abridged version of my dissertation].

⁶³ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, eds, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Walter R. Fisher, 'The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning', *Journal of Communication*, 35.4 (1985), pp. 74–89.

⁶⁶ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 1967).

⁶⁷ D. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2020).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

while working to interpret the inner meanings and adequately describe the respondents' collective experience. The researcher constantly compares related incidents and assigns labels to data which express similar ideas. Categorising the data helps develop concepts, accepting the voices on their own terms.⁶⁸ This constant comparison method helps the researcher develop a conceptual understanding of respondents' experience.

Once a category has been determined for an incident compared with it and others in the general category, the researcher starts thinking of "the full range of types or continua in the category, its dimensions, the conditions under which it is pronounced or minimized, its major consequences, its relation to other categories, and its other properties."⁶⁹ An incident should only be used for one of the many properties it may illustrate, but overall, the incidents must be coded into as many categories as possible. Codes, memos, and diagrams can help the researcher to work from field notes to a conceptual understanding.⁷⁰ This allows respondents to express their actual feelings. The researcher looks for shared meanings among the responses.⁷¹ The constant comparison method helps the researcher reduce subjective factors in order to explore values and beliefs contained in the responses. The outcome of this work is a theory grounded in the data, a "grounded theory."

Since qualitative researchers focus on subjective experiences and feelings, they are concerned with the quality of their work and perceive replicability as incompatible with their procedures. Rather than repeating the research in order to generalise the findings,⁷² they consider their procedures to be transferable to other situations and "reject the charge that they should be able to replicate their studies, as in quantitative research which emphasizes deductive reasoning and hypothesis testing."⁷³ Some researchers have suggested using the term transferability, referring to the extent to which results from qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings, conducted among other respondents.⁷⁴

Conclusion: Some Thoughts about Thought

I've presented examples of theorists whose work illustrates Abdu'l-Baha's assertion that "the reality of man is his thought, not his material body".⁷⁵ There is an intriguing parallel between the 19th and early 20th century theorists and Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Both Durkheim and Gramsci focus on oppression by the state, noting that people absorb the social norms it propounds. Blumer, Peirce and Fernandez hold that understanding and deciphering metaphors is key in

⁶⁸ J. M. Corbin and A. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 4th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

⁶⁹ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 1967).

⁷⁰ P. Reason, *Participation in Human Inquiry* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), p. 357.

⁷¹ Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, *The New Language of Qualitative Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷² James W. Drisko, 'Transferability and Generalization in Qualitative Research', *Research on Social Work Practice*, 35.1 (2025), pp. 102–110, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315241256560>

⁷³ Nari Kim, 'The Replication Debate in Qualitative Research: An Approach for Methodological Rigor and Transparency', *Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies*, 12, special issue (2025), pp. 119–121.

R. Tuval-Mashiach, 'Is Replication Relevant for Qualitative Research?', *Qualitative Psychology*, 8.3 (2021), pp. 365–377.

⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*. pp. 185-186. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2014).

anthropological research. Although they do not mention spiritual attributes, all of these theorists reach beyond material realities as they dig deeper into collective human thought.

Bahá'u'lláh describes the search for truth as a fundamental duty for every soul and explains that when this search for truth is clouded by the discourse propagated by self-interested actors, it constitutes the most grievous form of oppression.⁷⁶ By studying and enacting Bahá'í teachings, the community is more able to engage in discourses of society which help forward the advancement of civilisation.⁷⁷

Anthropologists have often regarded culture as a response to comprehending the universe and have theorised that human rituals have been created to explain birth, death, seasonal changes and so on, whereas the Bahá'í writings focus not on ritual acts, but on fundamental spiritual truths giving rise to actions: "True religion is the basis of divine civilization. Material civilization is like unto the body; divine civilization is like unto the spirit".⁷⁸ Also, Durkheim maintains that meaning arises through interaction, whereas Bahá'u'lláh directs us to His teachings: "Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God",⁷⁹ and that, "It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action."⁸⁰ Thus, it appears that academic researchers perceive thought to be imposed by cultural and intellectual forces and Bahá'í teachings reveal thought to be an expression of spiritual promptings. Every individual ultimately chooses and is responsible for his or her thought and must continually scrutinise their ideas and social realities.

In this passage, Abdu'l indicates the primacy of thought which may give rise to action.

Although man is part of the animal creation, he possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings. If a man's thought is constantly aspiring towards heavenly subjects then does he become saintly; if on the other hand his thought does not soar, but is directed downwards to centre itself upon the things of this world, he grows more and more material until he arrives at a state little better than that of a mere animal... Some men and women glory in their exalted thoughts, but if these thoughts never reach the plane of action they remain useless: the power of thought is dependent on its manifestation in deeds.⁸¹

This article references researchers and thinkers who have expounded on various ways in which collective consciousness influences the inherited lexicon of ideas, opinions and tastes and focuses on the material world. The counterpoint suggests that applying our own spiritual faculties to assess inherited ideas must be weighed with our own intellect, insight, reflection, intuition, imagination, memory and understanding which allow us to perceive the realities of things.

The challenge for future research is to increasingly approach thought through a spiritual lens rather than one which most often bases its premises on the materially oriented measures of sex, religion, clan, caste, family, race, nationality, or occupation. Such premises may influence how people shape their ideas, opinions and tastes, much of which derives from social pressures to

⁷⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950).

⁷⁷ The Universal House of Justice, *Message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors on the Nine Year Plan*, 30 December 2021.

⁷⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*, p. 160.

⁷⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 184–192.

⁸⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 250.

⁸¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 17–18.

conform. Further, focusing on data derived from materially based intellectual concerns oversimplifies life by ignoring people's perceptions of reality.

On the other hand, research based on the assertion that our thought is our reality may take us beyond the reach of an intellectual, material set of premises by focusing on individuals' authentic, subjective realities. Exploring truth through a spiritual lens enables a deeper awareness and understanding of our spiritual nature and can inspire our personal growth as well as that of society. Such research can have the potential to harness a spiritual wisdom which could move our worldview forward. 'Abdu'l-Bahá encourages us with, "Let us turn our hearts away from the world of matter and live in the spiritual world! It alone can give us freedom!"⁸²

Author biography

With a Ph.D. from Howard University in Intercultural Communication, Deborah served as Associate Professor and Chair of the Communication Department at McDaniel College, Maryland. Her Bahá'í-related publications include *Second Century Believers* (2025), chapters in *Community Histories* (1990), *Winds of Change* (2019) and *Spiritual Consciousness as Evolutionary Learning* (2025), as well as the Bahá'í-inspired *Overcoming Information Chaos* (2025); articles about interfaith work at Bahá'í World News Service; Association for Bahá'í Studies and academic conference presentations; and twenty-two essays on bahaiteachings.org. Many of her Bahá'í-related writings are on Bahá'í Library Online.

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⁸² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 109–110.