



**BSW STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON IMPACTS OF INTEGRATION OF  
FAITH AND RESEARCH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY USING CONTENT  
ANALYSIS**

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**Presented at:  
NACSW Convention 2016  
November, 2016  
Cincinnati, OH**

BSW Student Perspectives on Impacts of Integration of Faith and Research:

A Qualitative Study using Content Analysis

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November 10, 2016

## **Abstract**

*The research question in this study is: What perspectives do BSW students have on the integration of Christianity and social work, in the context of their current role as a student and their future career as a social worker? Using the input of students themselves, this study seeks to explore what identified themes are significant to further measure the impact of integrating faith and research. Content (document) analysis was conducted on a specific research class assignment related to the integration of faith and research, repeated over several semesters with different sample classes/cohorts. Five themes were identified by the researchers as important to conduct and complete further analysis. Using a data analysis software (Atlas.ti), these themes all appeared to show a suitable number of occurrences, as perspectives identified by the students, which suggest the concept of integration of faith and research. The results in this study cannot fully quantify the impact of this integration but the themes themselves have significance for use in future quantitative research regarding this impact. This study adds to the small body of knowledge regarding the integration of faith and learning, and provides benefits for educators using these themes and perspectives to enhance their teaching pedagogy/strategies and career/faith advising of their students.*

## **Introduction**

During a standard research design class typically taken by juniors and seniors, social work faculty at Spring Arbor University have evaluated BSW students' perspective on the integration of faith and social work in the context of research. Through an analysis of these results, these researchers have begun an attempt to answer the question: "What perspective do BSW students have on the integration of Christianity and social work, both in the context of their current role as a student and their future career as a social worker?"

Barker (2013) noted that "despite the proliferation of research related to spirituality, religion and social work practice in recent decades, relatively little attention has been given to the role of spirituality and religion in the life of the social worker, and the subsequent impact that has on the practice context" (2013, p. 5). This could also be applied to how students are being trained regarding these factors. Sherr, Huff, and Curran (2006) discussed the integration of faith and learning (IFL). They expressed a concern regarding the efforts of Christian social work professors to provide IFL experiences. Perhaps their students' perceptions of IFL result in them not sensing these efforts are occurring. Their research question sought answers to the question of what are these BSW students' perceptions of the IFL indicators that faculty is providing.

For this research study, we see that there is a problem of very limited research attention devoted to understanding the impact of this integration of faith and learning in two ways: while a Student is completing their BSW education, and the ongoing role it plays when they enter the practice or career arena. Our means of exploring this topic is to discover how this may happen in a particular course using an assignment discerning and promoting this integration. This is followed within this study by analyzing student's answers to this assignment to discern some of

the themes and factors that arise from this integration process and the effect on students themselves, as well as how educators could implement this integration process more effectively.

This research study demonstrates its greatest significance in that the exploration of the impact of the integration of faith and learning (IFL) relating together has, as its foundation, the input provided by the students' themselves. It will likely yield results of specific indicators of IFL that could be utilized immediately and in the future. It could expand integration knowledge, with an increased impact for students, but the potential to also impact educator implementation.

## **Literature Review**

Rothman (2009) views the inclusion of spirituality as accepted as an integral part of social work practice. He also sees the necessity for this concept to be an essential part of social work education. Material on spirituality should be an integral part and infused into the social work curriculum, especially the core practice courses, such as research.

Relating to these findings, integration of faith and research assignments within specific courses appears to be a worthy idea to implement to promote infusion. A research study by Hirsbrunner, Loeffler and Rompf (2012) explores...

“...the role spirituality plays in selecting social work as a profession among 70 undergraduate students at a small private Christian college and a large state university. Findings from this exploratory study indicate that more than 80% of students considered their spirituality to be influential in their career choice, and significant relationships were found between students’ perception of their career as a ‘calling,’ the degree of spiritual influence on career choice and their additional motivations for choosing social work as a career.” (pg. 1)

These findings contribute ideas regarding what is important to be reviewed and included when analyzing the integration of faith and research methods.

Barker (2013) discusses how many Christian students desiring to live out religious mandates gravitate to the social work profession to serve others and promote social justice. Later she goes on to assert that “despite the proliferation of research related to spirituality, religion and social work practice...relatively little attention has been given to the role of spirituality and religion in the life of the social worker and the subsequent impact that has on the practice

context.” (2013, pg. 5). Integration of faith and research assignments within specific courses appear to be a commendable indication for analysis of subsequent impacts.

Rockenbach and Mayhew (2013) discuss how college students’ spirituality helps to translate research into practice and identify that spirituality is a multi-faceted quality and has five measures used to assess it. One of these measures is an active quest for answers to life’s big questions (p. 13). This quest lends itself to show the potential of how the importance of research tied in with spirituality (faith) and its analysis could be integrated by students and their professors to determine the quality of these questions.

The study by Sheer, Huff, and Curran (2006), first discussed in our introduction also identifies concerns about the integration of faith and learning (IFL) experiences. These concerns warrant serious consideration as it relates to the components of this research study and the use of the class assignment document being investigated. These findings establish the important supportive connections and foundational factors relating to the research question established for this study. Their concerns noted in greater detail are: what good are our efforts as Christian social work professors to provide IFL experiences if students do not sense the efforts; and if our efforts to provide IFL experiences are congruent with expectations of IFL experiences of students, how can we identify those differences and adapt to provide Christ centered social work education. Thus, this question is addressed: What are BSW student’s perceptions of salient IFL indicators of Christian social work faculty (Sheer, Huff, & Curran; pp. 59-60)?

This latter concern suggests nearly similar components of the research question we are proposing for this study, and linked with the other supportive literature we have iterated above, lends credence to implementing the research question which is the basis for our content (document) analysis. This research question is as follows: “What perspective do BSW students

have on the integration of Christianity and social work, both in the context of their current role as a student and their future career as a social worker?"



## **Methodology**

Guest, Namey & Mitchell (2013) detail how content (document) analysis as a qualitative research approach has advantages. One unique advantage is that the nature of this type of inquiry is being inductive and flexible. It allows for more detailed descriptions and explaining of experiences, behaviors and beliefs, and deeper probing into responses and observations (p. 21). Engel and Schutt (2013) describe the important components of a qualitative approach, in that it focuses on text rather than numbers and the goal of the analysis of text as a way to understand what participants really thought or did in some situation or at some point in time.

Guest, et. al (2013) also addresses the significance of the exploratory approach as it interconnects to our content (document) analysis, which allows for it to be more content and not hypothesis driven. To be content driven (exploratory), some specific characteristics must be present. Each of these characteristics described by Guest, et. al was a component of this study of BSW student impressions ... and are listed as follows: 1) observable attributes in the sample; 2) inductive orientation; 3) specific code/analytic categories do NOT have to be predetermined as coding is open-minded and derived from the data; 4) can use either non-probability or probability sampling (p. 254). Content (document) analysis, with these many characteristics present, as they are, is expedient for fulfilling this study.

## **Sampling/Instrumentation/Data Collection**

### Purposive Sampling

For this type, each sample element is elected for a purpose because these elements have a unique position, and you can study an entire population or limited group/subset of this population. Other researchers identify this type of sampling as judgment sampling, in that intuitively you, as the researcher, choose study participants based on their study involvement purpose (Engel & Schutt, 2013; Guest, et. al, 2013; Neuenedorf, 2002).

The sample frame for this study was comprised of students at various undergraduate class levels at the Spring Arbor University main campus who were enrolled in any one of the SWK 352 (Research Design) classes over several semesters, a required class for all BSW students. From the class rosters among the classes selected for inclusion, there were 100 students total that ultimately completed this course. Although limited, we can offer some of the general characteristics of the sample such as gender and class level at time of completion. There were 89 females and 11 males. Regarding the class levels at the time of taking the class, there were 12 sophomores, 55 juniors, and 33 seniors.

### Instrumentation/Data Collection

These sample students all completed the Faith and Research assignment form individually during their respective class/semester (see Appendix A1). The initial class/cohort that this assignment was used in had slightly different format/questions (see Appendix A2). The total number of quote occurrences was lower with this cohort, but among the questions/answers there was not a disparity in consistency when used with other class results. Through a class discussion activity, agreement by consensus of what information from the individual assignments

should be included in the full class compilation document for that semester was completed. The document was compiled and returned to each student before their class ended for the semester.

This document, as the instrument for the data collection procedure/process, provides data which becomes secondary content data. This data is aggregated for all classes and serves as the source for ongoing content (document) analysis.

### Student Impressions

This study's major focus is to identify BSW student perspective on faith and research integration. The following statement, provided by one of the researchers who was a student in one of the cohorts studied, allows us to better understand the student's perspective on the data collection process. It gives insight into how the student would receive the assignment and lends a deeper meaning to what we find in the results and how they may be applied to students and educators. The researcher's perspectives are as follows, based on her experience as a student in one of the cohorts studied:

*The values of Spring Arbor University (SAU) align heavily with the values discussed during this course. The values of the University, which will be discussed in a later section of this paper, are heavily integrated into courses at SAU. This was not the first class these students had taken where they were given an assignment requiring them to relate their faith to their field of study. Students are used to seeing assignments like this. Because of this, at the time, I believe many students fail to see the importance or significance of assignments such as this.*

*The assignment was initially introduced at the beginning of the semester in the course's syllabus, and was later completed individually, and as a group. Students were asked to complete the assignment on their own and bring it to class, where they*

*were broken up into several groups to collaborate on some of their answers and discuss their ideas further. Each group was then responsible to write their ideas on a large piece of paper and present them to the rest of the class. It was these final answers presented to the class by each group that were written down and compiled into one document of the class's consensus of ideas relating to the integration of Christianity, social work, and research. This process of group deliberation to develop one body of ideas that represents the whole class was fairly common in this particular course. This familiarity is partly why, as a student, this assignment didn't stand out as particularly special, despite its many benefits to students. Understanding the culture of the school is an important part of understanding the experience of the students.*

## **Ethics/Cultural Competency**

Spring Arbor University, where the assignment was completed by students, is a Christian university that can be described well through its mission statement:

*“Spring Arbor University is a community of learners distinguished by our lifelong involvement in the study and application of the liberal arts, total commitment to Jesus Christ as the perspective for learning, and critical participation in the contemporary world.”* (“About Spring Arbor University”, n.d., para. 3)

Each part of this statement, known as “The Concept,” indicates an important aspect of the culture of Spring Arbor University (SAU). First, “The Concept” identifies that SAU is dedicated to developing students who will pursue a lifelong involvement in learning. The second part of “The Concept” states that utilizing a Christian perspective for the purpose of learning is an important value of the university, and, thus, is integrated heavily into the classroom. Other programs at SAU require students to take a class dedicated solely to the integration of faith and their field. The final statement made in “The Concept” identifies that participation in the modern world is another value the university holds. Each of these values relates directly to themes that were discovered in the data provided by students.

Because Spring Arbor’s culture is heavily saturated with the idea that it is important to integrate our faith into the learning process, it isn’t surprising that students taking SWK352 (Research and Design) were very likely to have already done assignments similar to those shown in Appendix A. Students are accustomed to discussing their field in the perspective of their faith, particularly in their later years as a student. For this reason, there may have been evaluated differences in answers in correlation with the student’s class level (freshmen and sophomores, versus juniors and seniors).

## **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

Researchers already had a strong grasp of the culture of SAU due to the extensive time they each spent there, but cultural competency is only one aspect of ethical and excellent research. To conduct research at our University in an ethical and legal manner, it was necessary to submit and receive approval by our Institutional Review Board before it could be officially conducted. No data from this study could be related to any specific student, even by researchers (because each cohort compiled data), so an exemption to the standard IRB process was submitted and approved. This approval is attached (Appendix B) and shows an approval date of 7/12/2016.

## **Data Analysis/ Results**

Content (document) analysis is the recognized data analysis approach/procedure for this study. We need to reiterate the many specific phases necessary for this analysis.

### Document (Content) Analysis

Each of the following steps was included in this study. Identified steps in Document (Content) analysis include: what documents, images , or artifacts have been produced by my study population that are conceptually related to my research question (s); how accessible are these sources of data; and choose sampling units, Coding units and code attributes for your analysis (Adapted from Guest, Namey & Mitchell. 2013, pp. 252-253).

Engel and Schutt (2013) identify further specific stages for this type of analysis.

Following is a list of these stages, each of which was, again, included in this study:

- Identify a population of documents or other textual sources for study
- Determine the units of analysis
- Select a sample of units from the population
- Design coding procedures for the variables to be measured
- Test and refine the coding procedures
- Base statistical analyses on counting occurrences of particular words, themes, or phrases, and test relations between different variables

In her book, Neuendorf (2002) provides a helpful flowchart (see Appendix C) that was often consulted by the researchers to guide their implementation of the process of content analysis process. The work in this study was mostly concentrated in items 1-5 of the chart.

As a part of the analysis process implemented by the researchers using the steps and stages outlined above from all our sources, a coding scheme needed to be developed.

Researchers did this through extensive study of the documents and taking notes on ideas that seemed to present themselves frequently, using a research timeline as a guide. From this initial list of themes discovered in the documents, researchers were able to combine, eliminate, or expand various ideas to create a list of five themes that seemed to describe the ideas expressed most accurately in the data.

### Analysis Software-Coding

Once themes were created, a data analysis software was utilized, called Atlas.ti ("ATLAS.ti 7 for Windows," n.d.). This software, developed by Atlas.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, is designed to aid in quantifying qualitative research. The researchers were able to concisely apply the developed themes to electronic copies of the original documents and use the software to extrapolate quantitative data from the original qualitative data. Researchers were able to determine how many times each theme showed up in the student's answers, as well as the professor's original questions.

With the addition of some rudimentary quantitative data using the program, data such as frequency distributions of gender, class level, number of quotes as part of the themes, and the 5 themes was denoted. These numbers help to enrich the deeper meaning of the qualitative findings of this study. Coding provides aggregate data and just gives physical numbers to represent the observed trends detailed here by the researchers' observed trends.

### Conceptual/Operational Definitions

A challenge that Barker (2013) identifies to the scientific study of spirituality and religion is the lack of standard conceptual definitions for both terms. This could also be an issue as we try and identify conceptual definitions for the themes identified for this study. The researchers felt a need to create conceptual and operational definitions to try and eliminate this challenge. It also



helps in understanding and measuring the themes to identify what perspectives students have in integrating faith and research, which is the basis of the research question. These definitions will aid in interpreting the results that are to follow.

Due to a suitable frequency of occurrences, each of the following themes appears to offer perspectives from the students to suggest the concept of integration of faith and research.

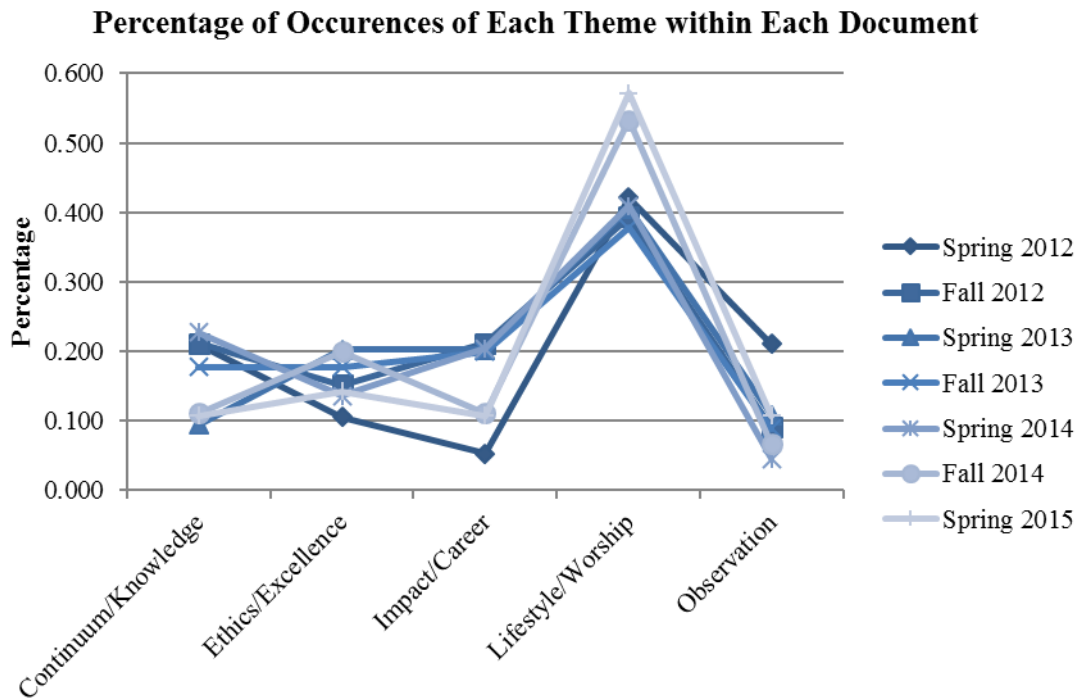
- Continuum/Knowledge: The continuum of knowledge is the ongoing knowledge students learn through the Research Design course which is not an endpoint but a goal-based faith journey that seeks to increase their ongoing discernment of facts and how they are applied.
- Ethics/excellence: Using the ethical standards of the Social work profession in tandem with their faith, especially those related to research, to assess their credibility through values that promote honesty/truthfulness, and being free of bias in determining/disseminating their findings.
- Impact/Career: Using the tandem of faith and research to better educate yourself to provide effective/excellent professional help to others, though observing well the world around us, and be an example/live a Godly lifestyle, as a means of personal evangelism to care for those in need.
- Lifestyle/Worship: Living out our faith in research and our faith in God using our God-given gifts as good, hard-working stewards in our academic, professional and everyday life roles throughout our life
- Observation: Conduct research and personal observation in all areas of life, including the types and the means we use to participate in worship to further discern our ongoing discernment of facts and how they are applied.

## Discussion and Results

Though this project was an exploratory study designed to find ideas that would foster more extensive future research, the five themes that were developed from the data appear to have general support within this study in their utility as salient IFL indicators. The researchers found that some of their original assumptions from their own qualitative analysis were reinforced in that there were many occurrences for each theme.

### Results

The results indicated under each theme as observed by the researchers are guided by the conceptual and operational definitions indicated with each theme. Along with observations about each theme individually, some general observations were also made. One of these is that, among all of the themes, the findings indicate that most of them are represented equally across most classes. There appears to be ongoing consistency across classes, regarding the occurrence of each theme.



Though there was a consistent pattern of theme occurrence across all cohorts, that does not mean that each theme was mentioned equally within that pattern. Across all cohorts, the Lifestyle/Worship theme occurred most often. This may reflect the religious atmosphere at the institution. Continuum/Knowledge, Ethics/Excellence, and Impact/Career each occurred at a similar rate, though less than Lifestyle/Worship. The theme of Observation was mentioned less often than each of the other themes, but still occurred frequently enough to be considered distinct and unique from the other themes.

Another general observation relates to the demographics of the classes themselves, and the possibly implications of these differences. One class was composed solely of females, and had the highest number of quote occurrences across all the themes. In contrast, one of the other classes with the smallest number of students and the lowest number of quote occurrences across all of the themes had the highest percentage of males in a class. Researchers also looked into possible differences across semester based on the class level of students in each cohort, but no discernable difference was found relating to differences in this demographic.

### Implications for Future Research

The trends that appear from the data are limited to offering suggestions of the use of these themes to conduct more extensive research, to increase our understanding of the tangible impact of the integration of faith and research on BSW student academics and their future career. Something that needs updating in future research is the revision of this assignment or to use another instrument that allows for more detail beyond just analyzing past documents. The assignment form studied and the student responses appear to be affected by certain factors which had an influence on theme occurrences. One of these factors is the questions that were asked. The first cohort class received a slightly different set of questions, but these questions were

generally similar to those in the other forms. There was a slight difference in wording and could explain some minor discrepancies among student answers compared to all the other cohort/classes. This needs to be addressed in future research.

Another important factor with some influence on the themes/perspectives from the compilations students identified most often is the composition of the class. Each class varied in size, number of males and females, and number of students from each graduation year (Sophomore, Junior, or Senior). For some cohorts/classes in reviewing the composition for that class, there were slight differences in focus of that specific/cohort class. For example, the very first cohort/class document and the very last cohort/class document reviewed in comparison were the most dissimilar with each other, but despite some differences in class composition, each cohort generally followed a similar pattern in regards to the frequency that each theme was mentioned. The data across all classes/cohorts is sufficient but not extensive to allow for concluding that the themes/perspectives identified can be implemented further to do more intensive research on the impact of the integration of faith and research. The perspectives themselves they identify do appear to indicate themes that would be related to integration of faith and research as we move forward.

## **Reliability and Validity**

This study has internal validity in that there is a match-up of the conceptual and operational definition, which we have shown within has occurred. Further there is content validity, which allows for the extent to which the measure reflects the full domain of the concept being measured. The various occurrences were put into themes which appear to define as best as possible this fullness (Neuendorf, 2002).

Reliability is present but limited, first as it relates to generalizability, which appears to be limited to this sample, but with the themes present, the ability to apply these to other selected samples and try and yield the same results on repeated trials. In relation to content analysis and reliability, the measure is not valuable if it can only be conducted once or by one particular person, which is not the case in relation to future use of these themes (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 112)

One factor that helps to strengthen the reliability and validity of this study is consistency across cohorts/classes. Each cohort/class had gone through the same program (with very similar, if not identical classes thus far), at the same location, and with the same professor. Each assignment was conducted in the same manner (individuals completing the assignment and compiling answers in small groups during class) and was preceded by the same assignments within that particular course.

## **Limitations**

There are some limitations considering the results of this study that need to be reported. With information gleaned from Barker (2013), one limitation present is that the study data is based on self-report; the student's perceptions are based on educational experiences, which may or may not be "REALITY". Another limitation is that the generalizability of the findings is limited, even with the healthy numbers present, in that the sample was not diverse, and especially ethnicity and gender, as a majority of the sample was female. This makes it very difficult to generalize beyond this specific sample. Another limitation is that the number of questions that mention each theme may skew data. If the assignment includes questions that specifically point out a theme, students are more likely to use answers that utilize that theme as well. Strengths of the research design that counteract this concern are consistency across cohorts/classes, as was mentioned at the end of the methodology section of this paper.

## **Significance**

This research is significant in that it begins to explore themes and factors relating to the impact of integration of faith and learning that are provided by the input of students' themselves. It has yielded some themes that can be studied further to outline more specific indicators of IFL. These indicators have the potential to gain future knowledge impacting both students and educators. Future research can be considered using some of the ideas suggested within this study to accomplish this.

There are several possible, ongoing benefits to consider in further discovering themes and perspectives denoted by students and their impact on faith/research integration. A beneficial impact is how students benefit more in their professional development and academic knowledge continuum. Within this study, the student researcher identified that, while going through the assignment in their own class, they may not have appreciated the value of these types of exercises. However, this student still identified that they believed it would be helpful for students in their careers. At any time, whether students valued the experience at the time or not, the students still practiced integrating their faith into various aspects of their life, studies, and future career. During their future careers, when they face ethical dilemmas during their professional work, they will already have practice integrating their faith into these ethical decisions as well as their daily tasks, and done so with evidence through their research work as provided by the assignment studied.

These themes and perspectives offer a beneficial impact for educators regarding teaching pedagogy/strategies. An example of this would be to use these concepts as components of a class assignment or project. These concepts could also assist them in career/faith advising of students, which is often a necessary activity of the BSW teaching process.

## **Conclusion**

Though this project was an exploratory study designed to find ideas that would foster more concrete future research, the five themes that were developed from the data appear to have general support within this study in their utility as salient IFL themes/indicators. These themes/indicators, used in the future, allow for the potential of valid and reliable research results.

The researchers recommend the consideration of a more quantitative approach using these themes/indicators (see Appendix C as a potential resource). This approach would allow for concrete measurement of the probable impact of the integration of faith and research in any sample cohorts/classes identified. This could especially relate to BSW student academics/careers as this study identified, but any research should include the perspectives of the student themselves as a foremost characteristic of the research process.



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## Appendix A1

### Faith and Research in Action

#### Assignment Form/Rubric

**Total Points Maximum 20**

**Final Total -Points**

---

5 points max

Points Awarded \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are your initial thoughts about your faith as it relates to research and how it affects your thinking about your world and the people in it and what actions you might take to impact the world and people around you?

5 points max

Points Awarded \_\_\_\_\_

2. What elements of the Christian faith are similar to empirical research methods?

3. What elements of the Christian faith are similar to informal observations?



5 points max

Points Awarded \_\_\_\_\_

7. How can your understanding of proper research methods in tandem with your faith help you not only in this class but in your future career and your ongoing walk with God?

**Submitted by:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student**

**Graded by:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_



3. What elements of the Christian faith are similar to informal observation?

4. What other examples can you think of that link research methods to your Christian faith?

**Submitted by:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student**

**Graded by:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Professor**

**Appendix B**

**Spring Arbor University  
Institutional Review Board  
Decision Sheet**

Project Category:

New Assigned IRB#: Baxter & Ainsworth\_293871\_07.12.16

Renewal Funding Agency, (if applicable):

Project Timeline: Start Date: July 13, 2016

End Date:

Committee Decision:

Approved as an exempted review, no further review needed unless protocol changes.

Approved as an expedited review, no further review needed unless protocol changes.

Approved as a full review, no further review needed unless protocol changes.

Denied due to:

**Recommendations and Comments:**

This study has been approved as an exempt review, category #4, as requested.

As a reminder, every effort must be made to maintain confidentiality of all participants, such as no data or information collected can be identified to an individual. All data should be coded for confidentiality, whether stored by paper or digital file. At the end of the study all data and identifying information on the study's participants held or stored by the researcher need to be destroyed.

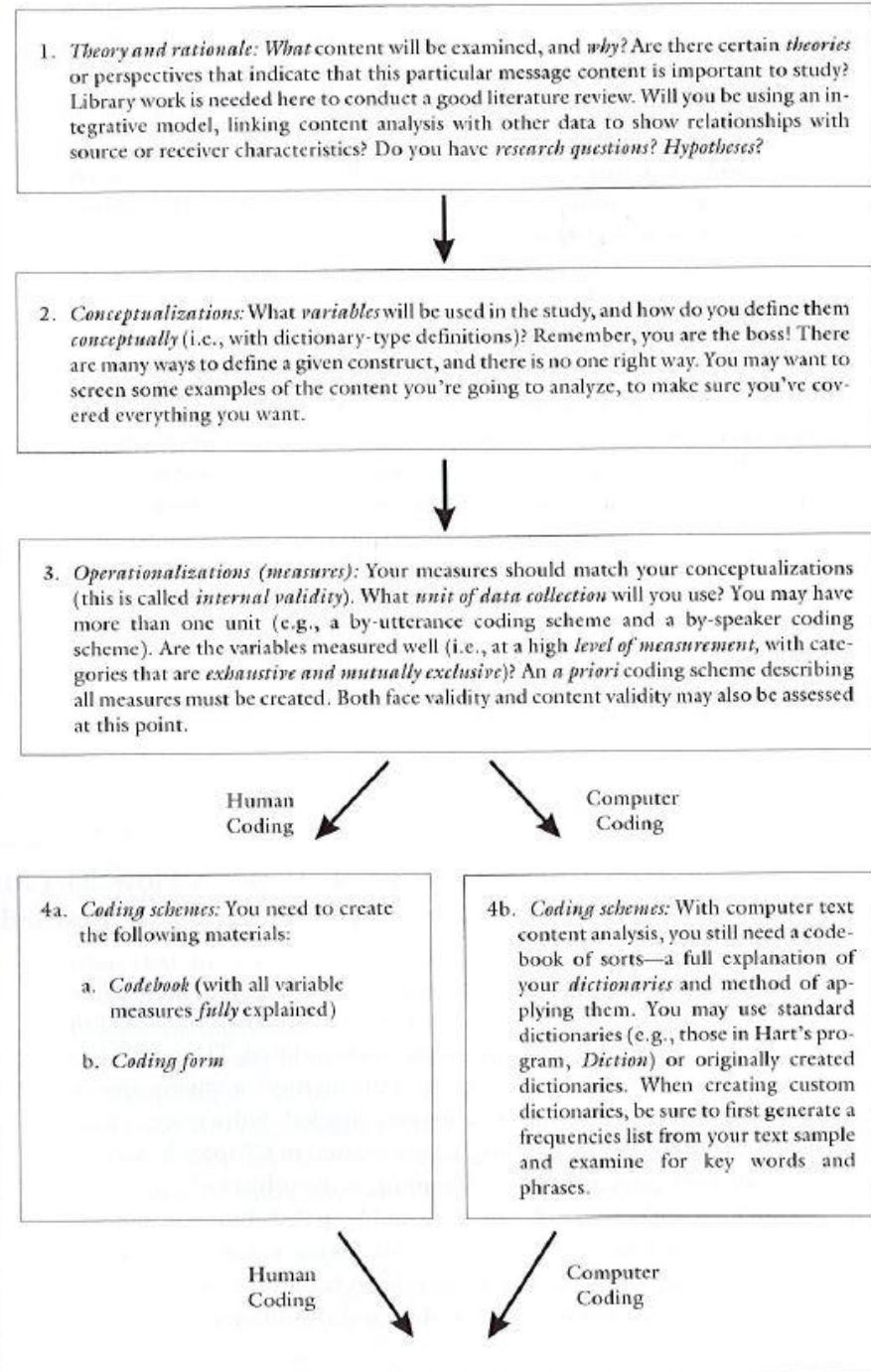
This approval is for a period of one year from the date of approval and will need renewed, if not completed by that time. Should the study's protocol change in any way, a resubmission for a new approval is required.

Please contact the SAU IRB when the study is completed, so the study of record can be closed.

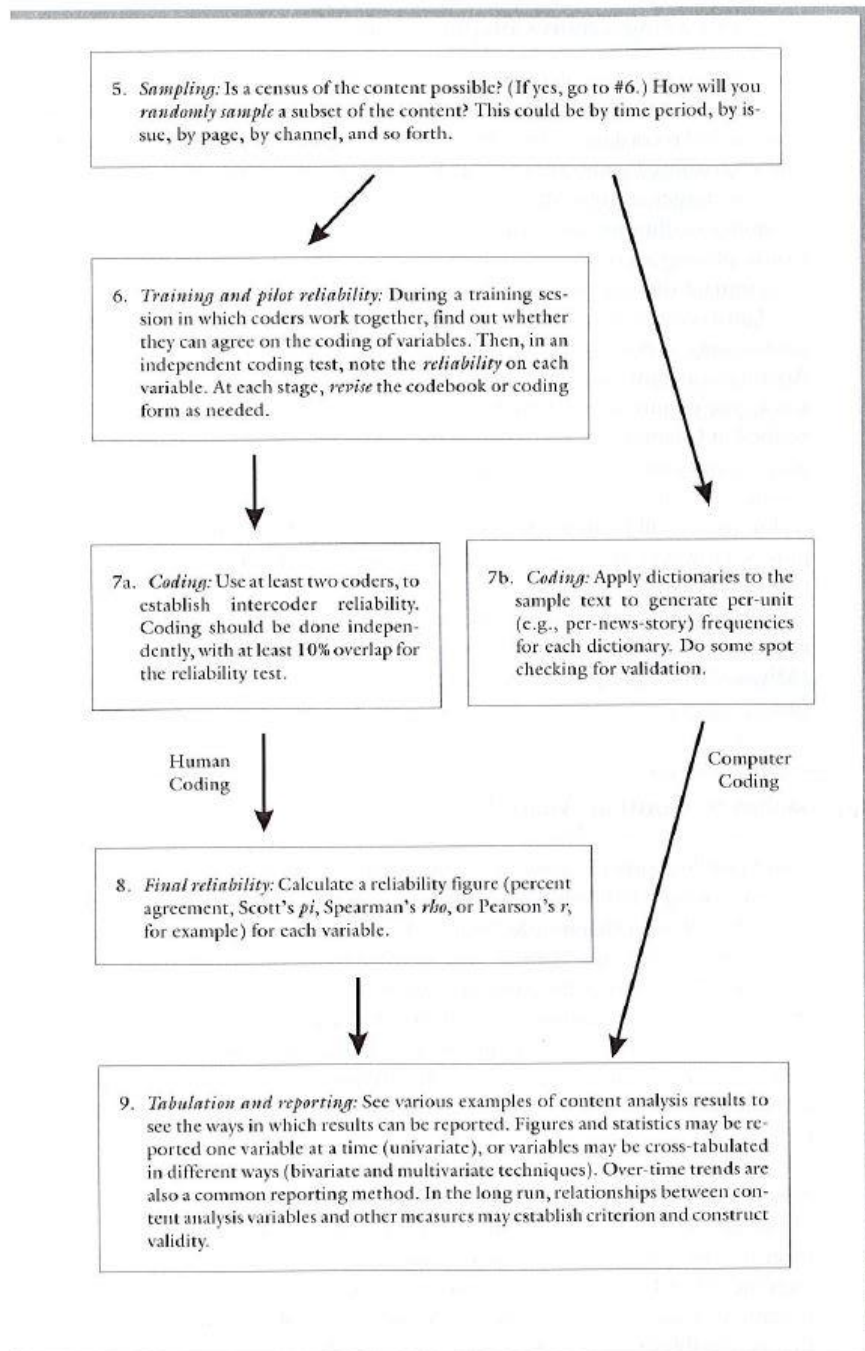
Date of Decision: 07.12.16

Signature of IRB member: Inna Molitoris, SAU IRB Chair

**Appendix C**

**Box 3.1** A Flowchart for the Typical Process of Content Analysis Research





Neuendorf, K. (2002). *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (pp. 50-51). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.