



Embodied Trust and Emotional Labor in Interfaith Encounters: A Qualitative Study of Urban Dialogue Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how trust is cultivated by interfaith dialogue practitioners operating within the emotionally and spiritually charged contexts of multicultural urban environments. Moving beyond institutional and policy-driven analyses, it centers on the embodied and affective dimensions of interreligious engagement through an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). Twelve grassroots interfaith leaders (7 men, 5 women) aged between 28 and 62, representing Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, were recruited via purposive sampling from three metropolitan cities in Indonesia. Data were gathered via in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes, recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed using NVivo software to ensure transparency and rigor. The findings highlight four interrelated themes: dialogic vulnerability, ritual participation across faiths, inner spiritual reevaluation, and the ongoing emotional labor inherent in interfaith leadership. Rather than viewing trust as a static achievement or institutional mandate, participants describe it as a fluid, relational experience grounded in human connection, shared practices, and personal introspection.

Trust emerged through emotionally intense moments—ritual proximity, theological reflection, and resistance from within one's own religious community—all requiring sustained empathy and resilience. These insights underscore the vital, often invisible labor interfaith actors perform in reconciling religious difference and fostering inclusive coexistence.

By foregrounding the lived experiences of dialogue practitioners, the study offers a nuanced and humanistic contribution to the field of interfaith studies. It provides practical implications for community leaders, educators, and policymakers committed to building sustainable interfaith relationships through authentic, emotionally grounded engagement.



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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world, religious diversity has become a defining feature of many urban societies. Cities now serve as melting pots where individuals from diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds live in close proximity (Corral de Zubielqui & Harris, 2024; Kamitsuka, 2021). Interfaith dialogue has emerged as a vital mechanism for fostering mutual understanding, preventing conflict, and promoting social cohesion, yet the lived experiences of grassroots actors—those navigating trust-building in everyday contexts—remain underexplored (Sung dkk., 2021). Despite institutional efforts to formalize such dialogues, the everyday lived experiences of those engaged in interfaith interactions at the grassroots level often remain underexplored.

Religious pluralism is not merely a structural reality but a deeply human experience marked by encounters with difference (Lilly dkk., 2024; R. B. Sulaiman dkk., 2021). Individuals engaged in interfaith initiatives navigate complex emotional terrains—balancing personal convictions with the need for empathy, negotiating boundaries while striving for unity. These encounters often evoke

profound existential reflections and emotional responses that shape not only interpersonal relationships but also one's own spiritual self-conception. As such, interfaith engagement is both a social process and a deeply personal journey.

Understanding how individuals experience and make sense of these interactions is essential for comprehending the true nature of interfaith trust-building (Johnson, 2025; Scharding & Warren, 2023). Beyond policy frameworks and theological doctrines, the subjective dimension—how interfaith actors feel, reflect, and respond in their lived realities—provides valuable insights into what makes dialogue meaningful and sustainable (Verhofstadt dkk., 2024). This dimension of experience is best captured through a phenomenological lens, which emphasizes the interpretation of lived meaning as it is perceived by individuals themselves. Exploring the phenomenon from this perspective allows for a richer, more humanistic understanding of interreligious engagement that complements and deepens existing institutional and theoretical discourses.

Within the broader discourse of religious pluralism and interfaith relations, research on the subjective experience of individuals engaged in interreligious dialogue has become increasingly significant (Feix & Wernicke, 2024; Yildiz Cakir dkk., 2024). Scholars have begun to acknowledge that beyond formal policies and doctrinal negotiations, the experiential dimension—how individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to interfaith encounters—plays a crucial role in shaping authentic and enduring interreligious trust (Asbury, 2022). This recognition has led to a growing interest in phenomenological approaches that seek to uncover the essence of such lived experiences.

However, methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and nuance of these personal narratives (Gkeredakis dkk., 2024; Zhang dkk., 2025). Much of the existing literature continues to rely heavily on quantitative surveys or institutional case studies that, while valuable, often fall short in accessing the layered emotional, spiritual, and existential dimensions of interfaith engagement. These methods tend to flatten the complexity of human experience, reducing it to measurable variables that obscure rather than illuminate the meaning individuals derive from their encounters.

As a result, previous research has struggled to fully grasp the inner realities of interfaith actors—how trust is personally constructed, how theological boundaries are navigated, and how internal transformation occurs through repeated engagement with religious difference (McDougall dkk., 2023; McVea & Dew, 2022). These limitations underscore the need for an interpretative and meaning-oriented methodology that prioritizes the voice of the participant and the depth of subjective interpretation. A phenomenological approach, particularly one grounded in interpretative paradigms, offers a viable and rigorous path toward addressing these methodological gaps and enriching our understanding of interfaith trust-building as a lived human experience.

Efforts to foster interfaith trust in multicultural urban settings have largely been approached through practical models—such as community dialogue forums, peace education programs, and interreligious policy initiatives (Valanciene & Valanciene, 2022; Voisard & Wallimann-Helmer, 2024). While these strategies have achieved measurable success in reducing overt conflict and promoting tolerance, they often rely on surface-level indicators such as participation rates, institutional partnerships, or general attitudinal surveys (Bernauer, 2021). These approaches, though valuable, are limited in their ability to capture the intricate, lived realities of individuals engaged in sustained interfaith encounters.

Existing studies tend to overlook the affective and interpretive dimensions of these experiences—how trust is felt, how meaning is negotiated across religious differences, and how personal transformation unfolds through repeated dialogic engagement (Orazi dkk., 2021; Ribenfors & Blood, 2023). Such dimensions are rarely accessible through traditional methods that prioritize quantification or institutional metrics. As a result, the current body of knowledge lacks a rich, human-centered understanding of what it means to build trust in interfaith contexts from the perspective of those directly involved.

This gap underscores the necessity of an alternative methodological lens—one that privileges the subjective experience and seeks to explore meaning as it emerges in context (Noval dkk., 2024;

Owusu & Korankye, 2023). A phenomenological approach, particularly one grounded in interpretative analysis, is uniquely positioned to address this shortcoming. By focusing on the lived experiences of interfaith actors, phenomenology offers a holistic and in-depth account of how trust is cultivated, challenged, and internalized within the complexities of religious pluralism.

Previous research on interfaith engagement has focused largely on institutional frameworks, theological dialogues, and policy-level analysis (Amah, 2022; R. Sulaiman dkk., 2022). While these studies have contributed to our understanding of interreligious relations, few have examined how individuals personally experience trust-building across religious lines. Some works have begun to explore affective responses in interfaith contexts, such as emotional resilience or empathy, but often within limited cultural or regional scopes (Emadi, 2023). Moreover, little is known about how grassroots interfaith leaders in multicultural urban environments interpret and navigate the process of cultivating trust. This study seeks to build on these earlier efforts by placing lived experience at the center of inquiry.

To address this, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (Roberts, 2023; Zmoon, 2023). This method is chosen for its ability to uncover the deep meaning individuals assign to complex social interactions. Unlike other qualitative designs, phenomenology focuses on subjective interpretation and personal meaning as experienced in context (Fazliev dkk., 2019). By applying this lens, the study explores how interfaith actors make sense of trust, difference, and relational transformation. It responds directly to the previously identified knowledge gap by offering a rich, experience-based perspective on interfaith trust-building.

This article is structured into six sections. The introduction provides a background to the phenomenon and outlines the knowledge gap (Carter, 2025; Ohreen, 2022). The method section explains the interpretative phenomenological design and data collection process (Geppert, 2019). The results section presents the key themes derived from the participants' narratives. The discussion interprets these findings in light of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and implications for future research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of interfaith actors in cultivating trust within multicultural urban communities. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on uncovering the essence and meaning of subjective experiences from the perspectives of those who live them (Hämäläinen dkk., 2021). The interpretative branch, influenced by Heideggerian philosophy, was selected for its emphasis on the co-construction of meaning between the participant's lifeworld and the interpretive context in which it is understood. This approach was deemed appropriate for investigating how interfaith leaders interpret and make sense of their encounters, struggles, and reflections in the process of building trust across religious boundaries.

Participants

Participants consisted of interfaith leaders and facilitators actively involved in community-based interreligious dialogue initiatives across three major urban centers. Individuals were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on those with at least three years of active engagement in interfaith dialogue programs. Inclusion criteria included individuals aged 30 years or older who had facilitated or participated in interfaith activities at the grassroots level and were recognized within their respective religious communities. Exclusion criteria involved individuals whose participation was limited to academic or policy-driven engagements without direct experience in community dialogue (Kallinen, 2019). A total of 12 participants were involved, comprising 7 men and 5 women, with an age range of 33 to 62 years. Participants represented diverse religious affiliations, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended prompts designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives. Interviews were conducted in neutral, comfortable settings selected by the participants to ensure privacy and psychological safety. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature and revised following a pilot interview (Kardgar & Rahimirad, 2022). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring depth and comprehensiveness of the experiential accounts.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method specifically suited for exploring how individuals interpret significant life experiences. The analytic process involved multiple stages: initial reading and re-reading of transcripts, identification of meaning units, development of emergent themes, and synthesis of superordinate themes that encapsulated the essence of the lived experiences. NVivo software was used to assist in data management and coding (Khazaie dkk., 2020). Themes were derived inductively, ensuring alignment with the participants' own words and meanings, and interpreted within the broader context of interfaith trust and dialogic engagement. Reflexive memoing was employed throughout to maintain analytic rigor and transparency.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose, procedures, and implications of the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. All procedures adhered to the ethical standards outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable national research ethics regulations.

RESULTS

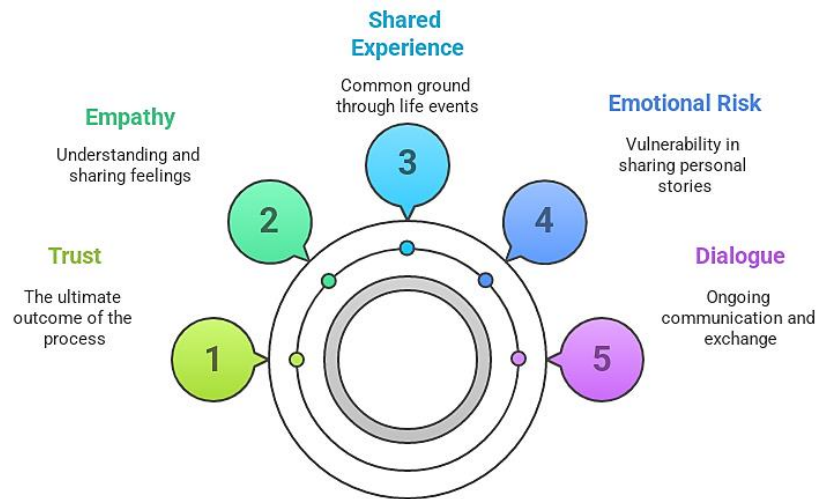
Trust as a Dialogic Process Rooted in Shared Vulnerability

Participants described trust-building not as a predefined goal but as an ongoing, dialogic process. Trust emerged through moments of personal disclosure, emotional resonance, and mutual recognition of human fragility.

“I remember during one session, a Christian pastor shared how his family suffered during the riots. I responded not as a Muslim cleric, but as a father who also feared for his children. In that moment, we were not different.” (Participant 3)

These exchanges, marked by openness and emotional risk, created a space where participants transcended religious identities and engaged in deep mutual understanding. Trust was not imposed but cultivated over time through empathy and shared human experience.

Trust-Building Process



Negotiating Religious Boundaries through Ritual Encounters

Engagement in each other's religious practices—such as attending prayers, communal meals during Ramadan, or visiting temples—was frequently mentioned as a turning point in the participants' journeys toward interfaith solidarity. These embodied experiences served to both humanize the "religious other" and renegotiate perceived doctrinal divides.

“When I entered their church for the first time, I was nervous. But they didn't try to convert me—they just invited me to sing. That moment made me realize, we are all seeking peace in our own way.” (Participant 7)

Ritual proximity fostered affective connections, dismantling stereotypes and replacing fear with respect. Participants emphasized that these experiences allowed them to reframe religious boundaries as relational rather than oppositional.

Inner Struggles and Faith Reinterpretation in Dialogical Contexts

Several participants reported internal spiritual conflicts as they engaged in sustained interfaith dialogues. These moments were not seen as threats to their faith but as opportunities for reinterpretation and growth.

“Before I joined this movement, I thought engaging deeply with other faiths would weaken mine. But over time, I found my own beliefs becoming deeper—because I had to articulate them, challenge them, and still embrace them.” (Participant 1)

These reflections highlight how interfaith engagement can act as a catalyst for theological introspection, ultimately reinforcing a more mature and inclusive religious identity.

Interfaith Leadership as Emotional Labor

Participants unanimously viewed their role in fostering interfaith trust as emotionally taxing. They described carrying the weight of communal expectations, navigating hostility from within their own communities, and managing the fragility of interfaith networks.

“Sometimes my own community calls me a traitor. They don't understand that peace-building is not betrayal. It's emotional labor—we absorb the pain of many so that dialogue can happen.” (Participant 6)

This theme underscores the invisible labor of interfaith leaders who act as bridges between conflicting narratives. Their emotional resilience and commitment to relational peace-building emerged as vital elements in sustaining interreligious trust.

Across all narratives, trust was found not to be a static achievement but a dynamic, fragile, and relational process. It was built through shared vulnerability, ritual encounter, theological

reflection, and emotional labor. The participants' lived experiences illuminate the depth and complexity of interfaith engagement beyond formal dialogues or institutional agendas.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Core Findings

This study revealed that interfaith trust is cultivated through dialogic vulnerability, ritual engagement, spiritual introspection, and emotional labor (Thomas & Andruetan, 2022; Wang dkk., 2024). These experiences reflect a deeply human process in which trust is not merely established institutionally, but lived and felt relationally, providing a rich response to the research question concerning how interfaith actors build and experience trust in multicultural urban communities.

Contribution to the Research Question

The findings of this study provide a nuanced answer to the central research question by uncovering the ways in which interfaith trust is constructed through personal meaning-making rather than formalized structures. Participants demonstrated that trust emerges from shared emotional risk, engagement with the sacred practices of others, and the capacity to reinterpret one's own faith through dialogical encounters (Maltabarova, 2022). This research contributes uniquely by foregrounding the emotional, reflective, and relational dimensions of interfaith experience, offering a textured understanding of trust as a lived phenomenon rather than a measurable outcome. These insights enrich current discourses by illustrating that interfaith trust is not imposed or taught—it is nurtured through repeated acts of mutual recognition and respect.

Relation to Existing Literature and Theories

The results of this study resonate with existing research that emphasizes empathy and affect in interfaith relations (Miller, 2020), but extend beyond by articulating how these emotional responses are cultivated through ritual proximity and existential reflection. Consistent with (Neumann, 2019) exploration of interfaith leaders in peacebuilding, this study reaffirms the role of emotional labor and community navigation in sustaining dialogue. However, it diverges by emphasizing the interpretative process through which actors make sense of religious difference and integrate it into their spiritual worldview. The findings also support interpretative phenomenological theories that suggest individuals construct meaning through dialogical and embodied experience (Nicolae, 2023). Rather than viewing religious boundaries as fixed, participants reframed them as permeable and relational—a perspective that challenges essentialist views of identity and aligns with hermeneutic understandings of being-in-the-world.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold significant implications for both scholarly understanding and practical application in interfaith contexts (Habeeb & Bhattacharya, 2024; Koleva dkk., 2023). From a social perspective, the results illustrate that interfaith trust is not merely a byproduct of institutional policies but is rooted in relational and affective dynamics experienced by individuals in everyday settings. The insights into ritual encounters and emotional labor offer a valuable framework for community leaders, educators, and policymakers seeking to foster more inclusive and sustainable interfaith engagements. Culturally, these narratives challenge dominant assumptions about religious boundaries, showing that trust is nurtured through humility, vulnerability, and shared humanity. Professionally, interfaith practitioners may benefit from recognizing the inner tensions and growth experienced by actors involved in such dialogues, thereby integrating emotional intelligence into training programs and community practices.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers rich interpretative insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling and a relatively small participant group limits the transferability of findings to broader populations or contexts. Additionally, the interpretative phenomenological method, while appropriate for exploring depth of meaning, is inherently subjective and context-bound.

The urban multicultural setting may also present unique dynamics not fully applicable to rural or monoreligious environments. These constraints do not diminish the validity of the findings but highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity and the non-generalizable nature of phenomenological inquiry. Such limitations should be seen as opportunities for deeper, context-specific exploration rather than as shortcomings.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research may build on these findings by exploring how interfaith trust is constructed in different cultural or geographic contexts, particularly in rural or post-conflict settings. Comparative phenomenological studies could illuminate how sociopolitical structures influence the personal experiences of trust across religious communities. Additionally, longitudinal studies may reveal how interfaith trust evolves over time, especially in response to social crises or institutional changes. Investigating the role of digital platforms in shaping interfaith encounters also presents a timely and underexplored direction. Ultimately, these future inquiries can further enrich the field of interfaith dialogue by deepening our understanding of the complex and evolving nature of religious coexistence through the lens of lived experience.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how interfaith actors experience and construct trust in multicultural urban communities through the lens of interpretative phenomenology. It found that trust emerges not from formal structures but through dialogic vulnerability, ritual encounters, inner spiritual reflection, and sustained emotional labor. These findings address the gap in prior research by highlighting the deeply personal and relational aspects of interfaith engagement that institutional approaches often overlook. The study contributes to a richer understanding of religious coexistence by emphasizing the lived experiences and interpretive processes of individuals actively involved in interfaith dialogue. It also provides practical insights for interfaith practitioners, educators, and community leaders seeking to foster trust across religious boundaries. Future research could expand this work by applying similar methods in different cultural or digital contexts to further explore the dynamics of interfaith trust.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding, support, and affiliations have been transparently disclosed, and no competing financial or personal relationships have influenced the conduct or reporting of this research.

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