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An Ethnographic Research of a Faith-Based Organization: Perspectives from a *Backyard*

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present and reflect upon the perspectives and challenges of a backyard researcher doing ethnography at a faith-based organization which is also the researcher's own workplace. As ethnography extends its influence in theological research, the theological community re-evaluates this research method. Moving beyond the traditional study of texts towards the study of traditions embodied in practices of faith-based communities, ethnographic theological research asserts to engage in the God-talk through the practices of these communities. This article presents a review of ethnography as a methodology in theological research focusing on faith-based organizations. It will look into several

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ethnographic research models in theology, engage with an ethnographic study of organizational culture, and draw on possibilities for faith-based organizations. Special attention will be given to the implications of *backyard* research when the research field is the researcher's workplace, focusing on the researcher and questions of identity, influence, subjectivity, and validity of data and data interpretation. The conclusions and recommendations are presented for other students engaged in research, particularly those who are researching the backyard of their own communities.

Keywords

ethnography, organization, backyard research, researcher, data

1   Introduction

The purpose of this article is to show and reflect upon the challenges that a *backyard* researcher faces when undertaking a research project at the same organization they work. Before we come to the characteristics and challenges of *backyard* research, we need to provide an overview of ethnographic research and how it is applied in the case of theological research and organizations.

2   Ethnography and Theology

The theological community started adopting ethnographic research in an attempt to move beyond the study of texts towards attending to the 'embodied' theology.

After the recognition of cultural aspects and their influence in world missionary work Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich bring

culture into the theological discussion.[1] Kathryn Tenner and Daveney Brown were the first to engage other theologians in applying the ethnographic instruments in theological reflection by attributing theology to a statute of a culture. According to their statement of intention in their work, and *Converging on culture* in particular, they state that "we are primarily interested in using a cultural stance to reconceptualize the academic discipline of theology for purposes of defense and reform."[2]

These works motivated the interest for the task among other authors who are promoting ethnography as a methodology in theological research, as well as the ethnographic practice in theological work, among these the most cited work is *Ethnography as Theology and Christian Ethics* by Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, who claim that perceiving the Christian environment as a locus of embodied theology is a realistic perspective over the theology.[3]

Beyond these works, the interest for the ethnographic approach is attested by the *Network of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* founded in 2007 by Pete Ward and Christian Scharen.[4]

Christian community is perceived as a distinct culture with characteristic values, rituals, and traditions, and this culture is the connection we see God through. Academic theology is restoring

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[1] See Richard NIEBUR, *Christ and Culture*, 1975 and Paul TILLICH, *Theology of Culture* 1964.

[2] Delwin BROWN, Sheila Greeve DAVANEY, and Kathryn TANNER, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 2001, IV.

[3] Aana Marie VIGEN, and Christian Batalden SCHAREN, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics,* London, Continuum, 2011, p. 16.

[4] The Network of Ecclesiology and Ethnography Website available at https://www.ecclesiologyandethnography.net/ (accessed on 20.12.2020)

its ""embodied" " nature by looking into the culture. There are several ways of *looking* through ethnographic tools in theology. Paul Fiddes in "Ecclesiology and ethnography" (ed. Pete Ward) is *looking* through the lens of triune revelation. By looking at the Christian community starting with their beliefs, he observes their engagement which includes their stories and practices that talk about God that, as a result, generate models of knowing God.[5]

Helen Cameron *is looking* through Theological Action Research. She proposes that a study of a community is undertaken through emic and etic partnerships that answer theological questions about the community's practice to renew theology and the practice for serving the mission of God.[6] Cameroon distinguishes Four Theological Voices that are the normative theology that implies the tradition followed: formal theology, which the researcher produces; espoused theology which is what the subjects say they do; and operant theology - what the subjects actually do.[7]

Mary McClintock Fulkerson, through a distinct way of engaging auto-ethnography, is *looking* at the social, emotional, spiritual, and theological environment.[8]

[5] Paul FIDDES, *Ecclesiology and ethnography: two disciplines, two worlds*, In Pete WARD (ed.), *Perspectives on ecclesiology and ethnography*, W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012, pp. 24-29.

[6] Helen CAMERON, Deborah BHATTI, and Catherine DUCE, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, London: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2010.

[7] Ibid., pp.53-56.

[8] Mary McClintock FULKERSON, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

For an example of ethnographic research of local orthodox religious practices, see the research of Timothy Carroll among Eastern Orthodox (principally Antiochian and Greek) communities in London and Mount Athos, Greece.[9]

3   Ethnography and Organizations

The ethnographic study of organizations has known similar approaches. However, in this area, the culture is perceived as the lifestyle of people that includes their relationships and attitudes.[10] The culture comprises all values, beliefs, norms, rationalizations, symbols, and ideologies of the studied group. According to Louis 1983 organizations are not only cultures but also produce cultures.[11] There can be dominant cultures and subcultures distinguished within the same organization. The dominant culture is the immediate culture of the organization: how employees interact to achieve the institutional goals. A distinctive feature here is that any organization involved in creating an image about its product or service they deliver can even say creating a distinctive culture for the external spectator while maintaining and developing its immediate culture can sometimes develop subcultures. Ethnography as methodology here brings out

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[9]　Timothy CAROLL, *Theology as an Ethnographic Object: An Anthropology of Eastern Christian Rupture* in Religions 2017, 8, 114; doi:10.3390/rel8070114 https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/7/114 (accessed on 20.12.2020).

[10]　Clifford GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, First Edition, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p.91.

[11]　M. R. LOUIS, "Organizations as culture-bearing milieu," in L.R. PONDY, G. MORGAN and T. DANDRIDGE (eds.), *Organizational Symbolism. London*: Jai Press Inc., 1983, pp. 39--54, apud Val SINGH, John DICKSON, *Ethnographic Approaches to the Study of Organizations*, 2002, p.127.

the reality within the organization and subcultures by appealing to day-to-day activities and the way these activities are motivated and explained by the participants themselves.

Ethnographic studies of organizations were undertaken with the following methodologies: William Foote Whyte, through Participatory Action Research (P.A.R.), together with the subjects of the research, are looking for the truth to find solutions to stated problems.[12] P.A.R. is similar to T.A.R. described earlier, having in focus the *participation* instead of the *theology.*

Dorothy Smith proposes the concept of institutional ethnography to study the social relations in the day-to-day activities of distinct groups in an institutional context. Smith starts with the conviction of developing inclusivist sociology that each studied group deserves respect to be heard, and not only to be described through a detached researcher's perspective.[13]

Thomas Lawrence and Roy Suddaby apply the concept of Institutional Work 2006 that refers to a wider category of intentional actors who create, maintain, and disrupt institutions. The distinction of this concept is in the attention to the individual who is an active agent in institutions.[14]

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[12] William Foote WHYTE (ed.), *Participatory Action Research*, Sage Publications, 1991.

[13] Dorothy E. SMITH, *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*, Walnut Creek, CA, AltaMira Press, 2005.

[14] Thomas B. LAWRANCE, Roy SUDDABY, Bernard LECA, "Introduction: Theorizing and Studying Institutional Work", in Thomas B. LAWRANCE, Roy SUDDABY, Bernard LECA, (eds.), *Institutional Work: Actors and Agency in Institutional Studies of Organizations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp.1–28. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511596605.001, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/institutional-work/introduction-theorizing-and-studying-institutional-work/04EA6EA71EA9DC499E2BE73DDAA1E820 (accessed on 20.12.2020).

If the first two methodologies in both theological and organizational research are almost identical in the practice of ethnographic research. The Institutional Work can be applied in theological research as a conceptual framework where a religious person is found to be influenced by God and His activity in the world and in this person, as well as in the mode this individual influences others and is being influenced by others; and what this community then does in relation to God; how this community is created, maintained and disrupted, including through participation in God and for Him.

4   Ethnography and Ethnographic Tools

In our research of this topic, we have not found a distinctive definition of ethnographic research of organizations that would refer to specifics of faith-based people that would go beyond the qualifications of a cultural group; therefore, we would appeal to the definition as proposed by Scharen and Vigen, it being the most accurate in terms of method, goal and theological implication:

> "we understand ethnography as a process of attentive study of, and learning from, people—their words, practices, traditions, experiences, memories, insights—in particular times and places in order to understand how they make meaning (cultural, religious, ethical) and what they can teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationships, and the divine, etc. The aim is to understand what God, human relationships, and the world look like from their perspective—to take them seriously as a source of wisdom and de-center our own assumptions and evaluations. By de-centering, we mean that while it is impossible (and not desirable) to cast off completely our own views and values as researchers and as people of faith, it is both possible and helpful to put them off to the side in order to focus on the stories, perspectives, and

lived realities of others—who may or may not share the lenses we bring."[15]

Ethnographic research is undertaken through interviews, a study of documented evidence, and participant observation. However accepted as representative, it is small-scale research; it is a cultural study, and the researcher is a participant-observer in the daily life of the studied group, both theology, and study of organizations. Ethnography attests to the validity of personal experiences as the source of knowledge; therefore, the researcher also includes a self-reflection about the research process and conclusions that are sometimes referred to as *auto-ethnography* or *testimony*.

In organizational studies, this takes the form of data analysis and does not necessarily include self-reflection. We consider this aspect worth mentioning and stressing testimony as a religious practice when the life of a studied group can be seen as a testimony, a story about how God is working in a community and how this community responds. A testimony is based on a story but is more than telling of facts.

However, the object of study in theological research is always God; in the study of organizations, the object can vary. Most of the time, in the case of the study of organizations, the researcher is external. It can be an external agency hired to perform the study through an ethnographic audit for institutional change or an interdepartmental review within the same organization. In his article, At-home ethnography: Struggling with closeness and closure, Mats Alvesson states that "It is rare that academics study the 'lived realities' of their own organizations."[16]

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15   A. M. VIGEN, C. B. SCHAREN, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

16   Mats ALVESSON, "At-home ethnography: Struggling with closeness and closure," p. 156 in Ybema, SIERK, Dvora YANOW, Harry WELS, and Frans H. KAMSTEEG (eds.), *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life,* 1st edition, Los Angeles, London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009.

How are the things in theological research? Among the students, it is mostly observed the tendency to study immediate interests and ministry involvement - local church, a program within the local church where they serve. Similar to the researchers in the Network of Ethnography and Ecclesiology, they are confessional insiders, even though they study churches or programs outside of their immediate community.

5   *Backyard* Research

When a researcher studies their own workplace or ministry, this is referred to as *backyard* research. Glenda Bissex and Richard Bullock proposed the term of backyard research in a collective work "Seeing for Ourselves: Case-Study Research by Teachers of Writing." 1987 where they speak about research undertaken by the teachers in the schools where they worked.[17] Glesne Corrine and Alan Peshkin, in "Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction" develop on several problems related to the researcher's role and interaction in the *backyard.*[18]

Another term used for the same phenomenon is found in collective work "Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life" under *at-home ethnography.*[19]

5.1 Backyard Research: sensitive moments

John Creswell stresses the sensitivity of the research as a task when it is done at the researcher's workplace. He does acknowledge that the data could be easier to collect, but these

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[17] Glenda BISSEX, Richard BULLOCK (eds.), *Seeing for Ourselves: Case-Study Research by Teachers of Writing,* Heinemann, 1987.

[18] Corrine GLESNE, Alan PESHKIN, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction, White Plains*, N.Y., Longman Pub Group, 1991.

[19] M. ALVESSON, At-home ethnography....

can be erroneous. Therefore it is the researcher's responsibility to show how the data will not be compromised and how these data will not put the research participants or the researcher at risk.[20] In theological research and ethnography, the backyard from the beginning is our faith and sometimes even our doctrinal tradition. In our case, the researcher is not asocial and non-religious.

Backyard positioning must be declared and mentioned at the beginning of the research because otherwise, it can create the following problems:

Subjectivity is the way we perceive the world. Any interaction and reflection are being looked at and analyzed subjectively. Either through a scientific lens or the personal worldviews of the researcher.

Bias is a clear distinction of *backyard* research. The empathy with the subjects and the research field are blinding the researcher.

The researcher needs to distinguish between his roles as a member of the studied community or organization and his research implication and their relationship. Is he a researcher or an employee of the organization? Is he representing the interests of the organization, or his main motivation is the search for truth within the proposed research?[21]

Ethnographic research implies the researcher break into the field and makes himself familiar with the field to integrate to the point to understanding reality through participation and collect

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20 J.W. CRESWELL, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, SAGE Publications Ltd., 2013, p. 188.

21 Mary E. HAUSER, *Researchers Doing Research in Their Own (Or Others) Backyard: Reflective Comments*, in JADARA, vol. 27(No 3), 1993, pp. 22-29. Retrieved from https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara/vol27/iss3/9 (accessed 20.12.2020).

data for the study. In the case of *backyard* research, the researcher must appeal to breaking out, which is a deliberate action and mindset that implies detaching himself from the culturalized environment to look at it from a distance. It can be achieved through the method of *zooming in* and *zooming out*, as proposed by Davide Nicollini in his article *Zooming in and zooming out: A package of method and theory to study work practices.*[22] Zooming in refers to focusing on the practices in which the researcher participates in a studied culture when zooming out refers to the levels of contextualization and theorization.

5.2 Backyard research: problems

Other problems in *backyard* research include getting access to the field research that implies informing the organization's managers and declaring the purpose of the research. This step is compulsory for any research; however, several problems come with it in backyard research.

The role of the researcher comes in conflict with the role of the employee (i.e., the implications of double role, time dedicated to each role, and the advantages for the organization.) As a result, we speak of representing the interest of the organization versus the research interests. Such positioning can be addressed with the question, "are you for us or against us?"

Mats Alvesson discusses the problem of sources of influence that control the access to the subjects of study, the social dynamics, and the language in interviews. The subjects will interact with the researcher within the social norms of the organization.[23] If

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[22] Davide NICOLINI, "Zooming in and zooming out: A package of method and theory to study work practices" in Ybema, SIERK, Dvora YANOW, Harry WELS, Frans H. KAMSTEEG, (eds.), *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life*, 1st edition, Los Angeles, London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009, pp.120-138.

[23] M. ALVESSON, At-home ethnography…, pp. 157-158.

the researcher detaches themselves from the organizational culture, the same cannot be imposed on the subjects. This issue is extended to the data validation task, when the subjects will provide selective information because of the fear of revealing problems within the organization, or conflicts or in avoidance of touching ethical or political aspects or even "dangerous information," as named by Glesne and Peshkin, "dangerous" not only for the researcher, researcher as an employee but also for the public image of the organization.[24]

At the data interpretation stage, the researcher will be overwhelmed by the emotional load, which can include the fear of losing the job, stigmatization, and the desire to bring out the truth through the study. Due to the research, the researcher's relationship with the organization can suffer, depending on the results, that his loyalty to the organization as an employee will be questioned.

5.3 Backyard research: recommendations

There are no solutions for these problems. The cited authors bring out that not any researcher can carry out the double role in backyard research and stay aware of all implications of such research, therefore opting for *backyard* research must be well-weighted in advance.

We return to John Creswell, who warns about the researcher's responsibility to show how the data will not be compromised, and neither the subjects nor the researcher will be put at risk by the data.[25]

As for the organization, to clearly state the intention of the research, the researcher will inform the organization's management about the research agenda and ask permission to access the field. Any adaptation of methods, research direction, will be

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[24] C. GLESNE, A. PESHKIN, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers...*, p.23.

[25] J.W. CRESWELL, *Research Design...*, p.188.

communicated to the organization promptly. The collected data can also present interest to the organization and, when presented adequately, can raise the credibility of intentions of the research and researcher. Here adequately implies that the data will benefit a potential institutional review without jeopardizing the subjects.

In order to minimize the bias, the researcher will negotiate with the organization that his primary role during the active stage of the research and data collection will be of the researcher to avoid conflicts of interest during the interviews and participant observation.

For data collection, analysis and interpretation, we suggest the method of "Zooming in and Zooming out" proposed by Davide Nicolini as follows:

When Zooming in, the researcher will approach the research field by looking at conceptualized and deliberated actions: What is said? What is happening? What are the patterns of speech and actions, and how these repeat in time?

The researcher will then observe the relations between the subjects and how the subjects relate to other people. Which relations are common, ordinary? Who participates and how these relations repeat in different circumstances. At the same time, the horizon of meaning, norms, languages, and rules will be observed. How are these established, learned, and transmitted?

Finally, the field observation will discern the heterogeneity and complexity of elements that allow the action or practice. How the practice is lived by the observed group (body) and how it is represented. In other words, how is the practice accomplished through the body?

Data analysis and interpretation will appeal to the method of zooming out. The data collected through observation and interviews will then be transposed into a macro view. How the set practice, including participatory roles, people, objects, and discourse, can be replicated in other locations that can include other departments, environments, or, in our case, faith-based organi-

zations and churches. The researcher will then reflect on the relations and effects these practices generated in other connections globally and conclude by drawing from the diversity of the representations of these practices in other environments under different conditions. Such representations can imply the same practices in other denominational and cultural settings or even disciplines.[26]

6   Conclusions

Even though ethnography is not new as a methodology, it is a newer approach in theological research. By approaching a community of believers as a distinct cultural entity, such research proposes to reveal theologically reflected representations of this group, their motivations, and aspirations concerning each other and God. The models of experiencing and knowing God that emerge within such research contribute to continuing the discussion of God in new ways through the living testimony of a body of a religious group of people. Because we are part of the body and are involved by serving and working in distinct communities, we are to approach research with the moral responsibility of declaring our intentions and aspirations as researchers up front, especially from our *backyard,* with its risks and opportunities. Making the conscious effort to detach from our enculturation within the studied environment and reflect upon God as seen in the field research and our own experience in this field can inform the theology in new embodied ways. Therefore, the researcher's mission, despite the challenges of the backyard research, is to communicate the truth through the research and motivate spiritual transformation.

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[26]   D. Nicolini, Zooming in and zooming out…, pp.120-138.

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