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# Researching the Teaching Context: Faithful Practice

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## Abstract

Christian teachers are called to a teaching practice that is biblically grounded or based on a biblical world and life view, but can the same imperative be applied to those wishing to conduct research in Christian education contexts? This paper considers one approach to qualitative methodologies that considers the ultimate goal of truth-seeking in research in the sciences to be a deeply religious activity. The ultimate goal of biblically grounded research is proposed as being greatest-commandment driven, and to accomplish this, an epistemological base that is holistic and relational is proposed. This epistemology moves from a biblically oriented sense of both being and purpose to bring a level of redemptive engagement with social phenomena. Such research is seen in the context of unhiding and/or reclaiming God's truth to bring transformation and reformation to research subject individuals and communities. The paper includes references to philosophical bases such as reformed critical realism and methodological constructions such as critical ethnography.

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**Introduction**
In recent years, educational researchers have emerged somewhat from the quantitative versus qualitative research methodology wars. The current era has presented itself with many methodologies and nuanced sub-methodologies, as well as the various computer software spinoffs to support these. The stated motivations given by Christians for research in education, however, usually lack any intentionality regarding references to, or apparent directions from, biblical thinking.

If we reject the notion of neutrality, what might be a biblical approach to research and particularly to a research methodology? As educators we should be aware that everything in a classroom, including the classroom structures, the teacher's actions and speech, has pedagogical as well as worldview or spiritual implications (Smith & Smith, 2011). We assume then that within an educational context the same may be applied to research practices and yet there appears to be a scarcity of comment relating to biblical or Christian approaches to research or research methodologies in education.

The primary focus of this paper will relate to biblical perspectives in qualitative research, though a broader application may be appropriate also—including the framing of classroom focused action research. Qualitative research in education is usually seen in terms of approaches such as the oft-quoted phenomenology, ethnomethodology, or symbolic interactionism. Each of these has much to offer but each falls short of an understanding of research that is biblically based because each emanates from presuppositions that are claimed as constructions of human cognition rather than divine revelation. While the common grace argument may be persuasive, it appears that for the undertaking of research in education, from an authentically biblical perspective, has not been well thought through. There is no intention in this paper to formulate a final research methodology product but, rather, to stimulate further thinking in this important area. In doing so, the paper considers a revelatory participation approach, makes use of some of reformed critical realism's philosophical assumptions regarding our perception of reality, a relational epistemology, and seeks to locate research-based truth seeking within a biblical understanding of epistemology and ontology. By way of a starting point, and as a response to the so-called paradigm wars in research, a biblical stance may reject the naïve realist ontology, or understanding of reality, of positivism. This traditionally pointed to the use of quantitative methods and often produced dualistic, purportedly objectivist perspectives determined through a reductionist verification of hypotheses by the use of statistical analysis of numerical data. A biblical stance may also find itself rejecting the subjective, relativistic, fabricated realities of a postmodern constructivism along with the dialectically focused critical theory.

Obviously one does not have the convenience of a passage in Scripture that specifically outlines a 21st Century research methodology (Using Numbers chapters 3 and 26 or 2 Chronicles 2 as examples of quantitative research or Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon as thick description reports of Solomon's research might be a tad biblicist!). The Scriptures do, however, provide some guidelines for what we may and may not do as researchers. In this context we would agree as to the moral integrity of our research practice—from the collection of data to its analysis and the drawing of conclusions. But this does not deal with the very essence of research nor the methodologies that we may be drawn to use.

If we use a broad brush to define what we mean by research, we could speak of the story of a phenomenon, told truthfully, contextualised and given a suggested hermeneutical framework. We could say also that it involves the use of one or more research methodologies that assist in the discovery and systematic analysis of reliable, valid truth about someone or something that exists and to draw conclusions from the discovery. This means that there is a need to take into account epistemological and ontological considerations and if we are to act as biblically focused researchers then our perspectives—our presuppositions and our controlling beliefs—on both of these should be aligned with the Scriptures in some way. More than that, as Christians we should be concerned also with the implications of our theological orientations on our thought and practice; in other words, giving some critical attention to the *weltanschauung* (worldview) presuppositions underlying our research endeavors.

Last century the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, lived for a time beside a forest in which a section had been cleared. The clearing of the forest meant that the earth and small plants that had been hidden by the trees had been revealed. Heidegger's (1972) concept of truth became linked for a time with the idea of things being cleared away so that that which is true is revealed. His thinking took into consideration the Greek word for truth mentioned earlier, *aletheia* (ajlhvqeia), which is used often in the New Testament. This word is related to the verb to be hid—and hence has the sense of un-hiding. For those in New Testament times the implication was to make something visible. Today, in English, we may use the term

discover (to dis-cover) or to realize (to make real for us).

Research can be, and indeed should be, a necessarily theological activity. If research is described as the seeking of truth then whether we conceptualize it in terms of propositional truth or the personal, revealed aletheia (the Greek word for truth used of Jesus in John 14:6) we need firstly to acknowledge that all truth belongs to God. As the oft (mis)quoted Augustinian aphorism says, "All truth is God's truth." Augustine also referred to the sequestering of God's knowledge by others who

> themselves did not create these things, but excavated them, as it were, from the mines of divine Providence, which is everywhere present, but they wickedly and unjustly misuse this treasure for the service of demons. When a Christian severs himself in spirit from a wretched association with these people, he ought to take these truths from them for the lawful service of preaching the Gospel. (Harmless, 2010, p. 183)

Seeking truth, therefore, becomes a seeking of God's knowledge—a knowledge of Him, of His Creation and of His created human beings, and reclaiming knowledge that has been given a different, non-God directed origin, value and telos (purpose) by others. Framing research in this way changes many things including our attitude towards it, our motivation for conducting it, and the use of the results of the research. It naturally would lead to an obedient response to the greatest commandments as Jesus taught them (Matthew 22:37–40) and an unselfish response to the prayer that His kingdom may come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9–10). The discovery of God, His person, His works, and His purposes in some degree may underwrite all of our research efforts as we use a knowledge of God, honest science, and reflective aesthetics as hermeneutics to interpret God's revelation of Himself though His Creation (Romans 1:20).

It should be noted, however, that while we may disregard much of the enlightenment pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge as we seek to un-hide (aletheia) God's truth, the severe limitations by which we are bound as finite beings mean that definitive truth, devoid of inaccuracies or the possibility of misinterpretation is rather a quixotic

goal. As John Polkinghorne (2010) has written, the search is never complete but we are able to draw towards what he refers to as the verisimilitudinous.

## Biblically Founded Research in Practice

Jesus' perception of reality flowed from a Godly perspective based on presuppositions that differed fundamentally from those of His followers and others. This gave rise to frequent misunderstandings and the misconstrual of His statements and parables. Needless to say, the situation has not changed greatly over the past two millennia. So how may research be conducted in a way that is God honoring and biblically grounded—founded on God's perspective of reality?

Perhaps the first thing that should be noted is that biblically founded research should not be research that has been blessed by a liberal smattering of Bible verses or references. As Stuart Fowler (1986) has noted with regard to philosophy:

> The development of Christian philosophy with genuine reformational power, then, does not depend on the incorporation within it of concepts, principles or propositions that have the status of divine certainties or even divine givens. Even were this to be attempted by incorporating texts of Scripture this would not be incorporating the Word of God in the philosophy; the Word of God comes to us only in Scripture in its integrity and not in passages which we extract to incorporate in another context. Philosophy can develop as Christian philosophy only as the philosopher philosophizes with the conscious purpose of faith to listen for and respond with submission of faith to the Word of God at every turn he takes in his philosophizing. (p. 421)

Our research, therefore, should include a faith response examination of relationality and direction in response to the mandates and purposes of Scripture.

## Foundations

Research is often seen as a knowledge-seeking activity and it is the defining of what constitutes true knowledge and how such knowledge is to be interpreted and used that underlies the differences between the different research paradigms. For some, the arguments relating to the use, or existence, of epistemological foundations may have reached the post-modern stage advocated by Evers and Lakomski (1995) who claimed that no foundation existed for knowledge—although, despite this, their conceptualization of knowledge also may be considered a foundation. In addition, Triplett (2002) commented that evangelical, Reformed (Kuyperian) philosophers such as Cornelius Van Til, George Mavrodes, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff have been critical of the traditional foundationalism that can be traced back to Aristotle, claiming that it was both false and self-referentially incoherent and may, therefore, be summarily rejected. A deeper concern, however, lies in the ontological foundations of the paradigms and whether these may reflect biblical understandings of being.

As a part of his well known work on qualitative research, Creswell (2013) has adapted a table from Lincoln et al. (2011) that sets out the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological perspectives on research that are taken by positivists, social constructivists, postmoderns, pragmatists, and critical theorists. The perception of being and origins, knowledge, values, and research practices that is suggested for each of these groups differs markedly from biblical perceptions.

## Relationality and Epistemology

Rejecting both classical (Enlightenment) foundationalism and postmodern non-foundationalism, and recognizing the primacy of ontology, it may be possible to conceive of an epistemology that calls for a holistic framework with guiding reference to a perceived ontological source—God. Such a framework for qualitative research would link the researcher not only to the subject of the research question as well as the human subject, but, in a network of relationships, would include also the ontological source, other relevant human beings, and other relevant contexts within creation.

The Hebrew word we translate as knowledge implies the entry into a relationship with the world we experience such that we not only understand it but that we also act on that understanding. The knowledge exchange between participant and researcher is contextualised within their relationship and this has implications for the communication that takes place and the interpretation of that information—the relationship facilitating as well as coloring understanding. Where participants are

called on to comment on the communication or actions of others, this draws on a second network of relational knowledge. In addition, the gathered data pertain to the relationship the participants have to their particular culture and the analysis of that data must also take into account the researcher's own relationship with his or her culture as well as to the cultures or sub-cultures of the participants.

If there is warrant for a belief that is properly basic (Plantinga, 2000) in a God of biblical definition and character, then this faith foundation—as opposed to the faith foundations of the non-existence of such a God, or of a different god—provides a particular a priori or presuppositional springboard for the attempted development of an epistemology that is of an all-encompassing nature. Such an epistemological viewpoint embodies rational, relational, and revelational knowledge.

With relationships being such an important, explicit component of much qualitative research, the epistemic encounter we might have with another human being, therefore, involves the full connectedness of that person—with the knower, with other knowers, with the rest of the created order and with an acknowledged Creator. Cross-culturally, or across sub-cultures, the ontological source, or perceived Creator, in this sense refers to such a source of being as perceived by an individual or a culture. The philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd (1960) referred to the idea of an absolute origin which would be held by individuals and cultures. This may represent, for example, the Hindu pantheon of gods, the God of the Abrahamic faiths, or the natural laws of Darwinian evolutionism. Researchers who do not take into account the fact that participants being interviewed may have a different perception of an absolute origin source from their own will have great difficulty seeing the gestalt of relationships and to a degree, the interpretation of communication will remain elusive.

Diagrammatically, the relatedness network may be represented as follows in Figure 1, where the dashed lines indicate the relationships pertinent to a participant's context regarding the object of the research and the dotted lines indicate the structure of relationships within which the researcher works. This diagram indicates the same perceived source for both researcher and participant but, of course, these may be different. This diagram illustrates the

links between the research focus, the relationship structures of the participants, and their worldviews, indeed, all features of the research questions being explored.
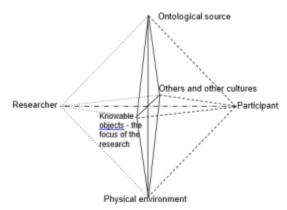


Figure 1 Epistemological relationships

In many cases, indigenous peoples, particularly those with an animistic belief set who see reality in terms of connected individuals (Bird-David, 1999) rather than isolated individuals, are more able to see the relational structures that pertain to knowledge. With specific reference to the type of knowledge that may be typical of the thinking of some indigenous groups, Battiste and Henderson (2000) draw attention to the importance for them of the connections between the ontological sources and the physical environment:

> Perhaps the closest one can get to describing unity in Indigenous knowledge is that knowledge is the expression of the vibrant relationships between people, their ecosystems, and the other living beings and spirits that share their lands . . . . All aspects of this knowledge are interrelated and cannot be separated from the traditional territories of the people concerned. Similarly, there is no need to separate reality into categories of living and nonliving, or renewable and nonrenewable. (p. 42)

Throughout the Scriptures, the link between knowledge and relationship is particularly strong and early in the Scriptures we see the intimate knowledge relationship of Adam and Eve. It is evident in His special revelation that to know God is to be in relationship with Him and under the new covenant we see that salvation is linked with knowing God or Christ (John 17:3).

**Telos**

Given this relational epistemology background for qualitative research, and given the significance placed on relationships and knowing in the Scriptures, it may be argued that the aim and end of research is not to gain knowledge for the sake of knowledge creation. Rather, it is to advance our knowledge of God through developing a greater understanding of Him, of His Creation, of His created beings and the relationships that bind them together. This becomes, then, the first telos, or purpose, for research. A second foundational purpose is outlined below. While it may be possible to explore the interactions that are fundamental to symbolic interactionism, the subjective meanings that these are said to establish may be important but they lie alongside, or may be contrasted with, a God-defined, objective reality. This reality, in many cases, may not be available to us as fallible creatures, but He has given us the capacity to study His revelation of Himself through His Creation.

As we also are created beings, related to Him and existing in His creation in communion with Him, our emic participation in the research task implies the possibility of revealed knowledge and networks of relationships, of which we are a part and that are to be explored. Of course, there is the question of how this may be done in any truly objective sense given our embeddedness in the Creation and in pre-existing relationship structures. All research, however, does become a theological endeavor—a *fides quaerens intellectum*—with the explicit purpose of participation in the un-hiding of revealed truth: a revelatory participation approach to research that includes pragmatic, cogent, and correspondence truth tests but that has a God-focused telos; an unveiling of truth as the reified will of God.

Researching from a biblical view of life and the world means that the hermeneutic framework used in order to understand the revelation embodied in what we un-hide, emanates from biblically founded presuppositions. For example, technology and the so-called scientific method, so popular during the reign of modernism, are used to uncover truth that is hidden in the physical Creation. The hiddenness of knowledge, in this sense, is something that is linked with our ignorance and we may use naturalistic techniques to un-hide it. The motivation for the research and the analysis and interpretation of the results, however, will be directed by a different telos and a different framework of presuppositions based on a relationship with the Logos.

**A Critical Element: Research with Godly, Redemptive Purpose**

In recent years, the search for useable philosophical bases that have traction within a Christian context, or perhaps simply for the nomenclature to cover a writer's preconceptions, has led for some to the consideration of a range of modifications of Bhaskar's critical realism.

> Over against both of these positions [i.e., positivism on the one hand and skepticism on the other], I propose a form of *critical realism*. This is a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence 'critical'). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into 'reality', so that our assertions about 'reality' acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower. (Wright, 1992, p. 35)

Later White (2004) wrote:

> Critical realism allows for a richer and more holistic approach to knowledge. The epistemological role played by informed judgment allows our knowing to embrace the realm of meaning and value as well as scientific fact. By placing a hermeneutic of faith along side the hermeneutic of suspicion the critical realist is able to confirm that knowledge proceeds directly from the fact that we indwell a world with which we are already intimately related. Because we are bound up with the world, and because our knowledge is always to a greater or lesser extent provisional, our understanding always proceeds from the givenness of that which we already know. (p. 167)

The key component of critical realism is its transformative nature (Egbo, 2005). Applied to

research, a critical realist approach implies the need for research to not merely seek knowledge but to use the knowledge gained to transform or empower others—often those who are participants in the research. This concords with the biblical leitmotif of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Fulfillment and has spawned such versions as critical theological realism (Polkinghorne, 1998), theological critical realism (Shipway, 2000, 2011) and reformed critical realism (Edlin, 2006, 2010). It also connects with the second commandment of Jesus (Mat 22:39) and is a practical response to a desire to see God's will outworked on Earth (Matthew 6:10).

This second foundational purpose of research is a call to transformation, reconstruction, and renewal: "As Calvin pointed out, to know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship, as the believer is caught up in a transforming and renewing encounter with the living God" (McGrath, 1996, p. 79). This applies to the researcher and the research participants. It is not surprising, therefore, that some Christians have adopted and adapted forms of critical realism philosophy and there also has been a move to recognize the outworking of this framework in research through methodologies such as critical ethnography.

This bringing about of His purposes in research is done recognizing God as the source of all being, that truth is defined in relationships, that we exist in a postlapsarian (post-Fall) world that, while marred by sin, is also blessed with God's common grace and the potential of redemption. The restorative nature of methodologies such as critical ethnography, when conceived from a biblical Weltanschauung basis, exhibits the biblical concept of the association of knowledge with obedience or action. In this sense, research based on a critical ethnographic methodology is not only designed to un-hide truth but also to solve, to recreate, to set to rights, and to empower. The researcher in this sense is not an outsider observing but a participant desiring to facilitate, aid, or enrich.

A note of caution should be added here regarding the promotion of a methodology or concept, such as critical ethnography, that has not been conceived necessarily from a biblical foundation. The redirecting of the common grace truth embodied in critical ethnography does not assume that all of the theory is worth preserving in its critical theorist

setting. For example, power differentials are an important part of critical theorists' understanding of relationship and these differentials are of particular significance for them in research contexts (Carspecken, 1996). Of course, for Christians, these differentials may also be important considerations in our research but the various power differentiated relationships involving an all-powerful God and the commands to love Him and our neighbor mean that these differentials take on a somewhat different flavor.

**An Example**
By way of illustration, one example of a visioning of research as suggested in this paper may be given with a possible project that sets out to explore the influence of Christian schooling as seen in the lives of graduates one or two years after graduation. Survey forms and interviews may be used to gather data regarding the spiritual lives of graduates and how many of them may be in further education or employment. To an outsider, the research may appear to be no different from research conducted from a secular foundation, or perhaps research that is secular but dualistic—with a Christian add-on in terms of the spirituality data.

This research project and the data may be seen in several ways and in each case the mechanics of the process may appear similar but the philosophical or theological underpinnings will be different. First, the research may be seen as data gathering and knowledge creation for their own sake or for academic publication purposes. A second perspective might be to provide evidence for the creation of future promotional strategies and materials for the school or to inform school planning. A third conceptualization would not exclude the first two but would subordinate them to the principal vision—a vision that emerges from a theoretical underpinning that contains a theological intention. It would be one sourced in a concern to see God in His works (in this case in the lives of students) and out of a love for His image bearers (graduated and current students). In this way the project may also take on some of the properties of an action research cycle, with the possibility of future cycles, leading to more effective fulfilling of Kingdom purposes for staff and students.

**Conclusion**
Our link to God as image bearers and covenanters, our embeddedness in God's narrative and

metanarrative, and in the community of image bearers, all provide context within which relational knowledge may be sought and components and relationships must be considered holistically in our research. In life, we are called to go beyond an appreciation of a vague *sensus divinitatis*, to embrace a loving relationship with God and with our neighbor. And this should provide the telos for our research: research that unhides God to us and to others; research that is redemptive and transformative; research that is concerned that His Kingdom comes and that His will is done. In the process, our education-related research needs also to align with our educational task of promoting and assisting with the information—formation—transformation—reformation processes.

The philosophical foundations for a Christian approach to research, therefore, include:

- An ontology that recognizes that the researcher and the research subjects are created *imago Dei*and they, as well as the research object, exist in God's narrative and metanarrative.
- An epistemology that credits God as the source of all knowledge and the mandate God has given us to unhide His knowledge.
- An axiology (or value system) that recognizes that the highest values relating to the discovery of particular knowledge must be in concordance with the value God places on that knowledge and its value relating to His purposes.
- A sociology that recognizes the importance of relationships—between the researcher and the subject, and the relationship of both to God.
A Christian approach to research, then, would appear to be one through which we learn, within a loving relationship, of God and our neighbor and act redemptively, creatively, or restoratively in accordance with the knowledge that we have unhidden in the research process. Such research may be seen as having a theological construction, even a form of worship liturgy, as well as building up others and benefiting the research participants and the rest of the community—to the glory of God and for His Kingdom.

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