

Who...is my neighbour? Human research methods as critical ways to more fully hear the voices of ‘others’

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This short reflection is offered to encourage theological students and researchers to consider using critical enquiry or research methods to support and enrich their own theological learning. This is with reference to living human research projects. Such methods are derived from broad theoretical constructs that challenge existing epistemological foundations as taken-for-granted ways of knowing in respect of human identity and representation. In the case of living human research, such approaches allow researchers to understand and appreciate their subjects from diverse and challenging perspectives. These perspectives, or interpretive lenses, are derived from subjects themselves, whereby the researcher not only seeks to capture what is said but also the epistemological perspective by which it is to be understood. Notwithstanding the tension created by utilising anthropocentric methods in broader theocentric projects, these approaches lead to more complete and valid understandings and representations of human subjects which ultimately enriches fulsome theological enquiry.

In mid-June 2021 numerous international media sources reported that a planned film about the 2019 Christchurch (New Zealand) mosque killings received widespread condemnation.¹ Those responses included members of Christchurch’s Islamic community, Christchurch civic leaders, and New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. Ms Ardern’s own ‘heroic’ characterisation was proposed to form the central figure for the movie. Ms Ardern rejected that suggestion. She did not consider that her own responses and actions, as the killings happened, had much of consequence to do with the event and its telling. Instead, the story and its telling was grounded in the identities, experiences, and voices of Christchurch’s Islamic community, together with the wider Christchurch community. There was no ‘white saviour’. That was a distortion, a misrepresentation, a colonisation of a narrative space that belongs to someone else. It was a denial of identity and a suppression of meaning.

The planned film project brought on a crisis of identity. Christchurch remains the story of those who were there. It is for their telling, retelling and interpretation. For us who weren’t there, it is for our hearing. It is in the telling (performance) and hearing that meaning is formed, communicated and understood.

¹ Emily Clark, ‘NZ community calls for movie about Christchurch attack to be shut down, Rose Byrne to drop Jacinda Ardern role,’ *ABC News*, 15 June 2021; ‘Christchurch attack film slammed over “white saviour” narrative,’ *Al Jazeera*, 14 June 2021; ‘Christchurch mosque attack: Producer resigns from New Zealand movie after backlash,’ *BBC News*, 14 June 2021; ‘Christchurch mosque shooting movie: Film-maker labels focus on Jacinda Ardern inappropriate,’ *NZ Herald*, 16 June 2021.

My own experience of critical enquiry was initially located in postcolonial theory and theology. My research challenged me to consider how it was that I knew what I believe that I knew and, how I construct and shaped that knowing through my own, complex 'taken for granted's'. I needed to learn to dampen my own voice so that I might more fully hear and faithfully represent the voice(s) of the subject(s) of my enquiry. In the case of postcolonial theory those subjects are often identified as silenced *Others*,² *Subaltern*,³ or *Alterity*.⁴ My enquiry asked, 'Who is my neighbour?' I needed to hush, really hush so that I might hear, see, construct, and represent that person faithfully.⁵

More recently my experience of critical enquiry has grown to include autoethnographic research design. As with postcolonial theory this approach is also situated within a 'crisis of representation'.⁶ Now, however, that representation extends to include the presence, the story, and the voice of the researcher within the overall enquiry project through processes of self-narrative. Chang, who describes self-narrative as the method for autoethnography, writes:

The reading and writing of self-narrative provides a window through which self and others can be examined and understood...[so that] cultural understanding of self and others...grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation.⁷

For Denzin self-narrative, in seeking to uncover the researcher's identity and story, is communicated both through performance (writing, composing, acting, creating) and its meaning for the researcher. He writes:

[Autoethnography is the] studied use and collection of life documents that describe turning point moments (epiphanies) in an individual's life.

The text can be analysed as:

- a. Real and its representation
- b. Text and its author and presumed reader
- c. Lived experience and its textual representation
- d. The subject and his/her/their intentional meanings.⁸

² Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 52.

⁴ Gayatri Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur,' in Francis Barker et al. (eds.), *Europe and Its Others*, Vol. 1, Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1984 (Colchester: University of Essex, 1985), 128–151.

⁵ James Winderlich, 'Audio, ergo sum (I hear therefore I am),' *Lutheran Theological Journal* 48, no. 1 (May 2014): 37.

⁶ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 'Introduction: the discipline and practice of qualitative research,' in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., eds. N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005); George E. Marcus and Michael M. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁷ Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (London: Routledge, 2008), 13.

⁸ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 35.

Denzin further writes:

The use and value of the autoethnographic method lies in its user's ability to capture, probe and render understandable problematic experience...experience can only be understood through performance.⁹

Autoethnography presumes that knowledge is constructed by human beings, and that researchers participate with their subjects in co-constructing such understanding.¹⁰ Within these theoretical frameworks it is therefore important that the researcher's own cultural and hermeneutical perspectives are identified and understood to gauge their impact and influence on a broader enquiry. Autoethnography forms one part of larger meaning making projects whereby autoethnographers seek to 'extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived'.¹¹ This can, at times, be untidy.

Stuerzenhofecker cautions, however, that the researcher should not be too quick to seek resolution to that untidiness:

...the construction of narrative identity should not forcibly strive for coherence and achievement of normativity, but remain in the paradoxes of conflict and incoherence in continuity as well as fragmentation.¹²

Critical enquiry or research methods, such as those that are identified in this reflection, can benefit and serve broader theological enquiry in a least two ways. Firstly, as with the Psalmist, such enquiry exposes the wonder and interconnected complexity of human life and experience, encompassing joy, suffering and sorrow (Ps 139:14). According to traditional biblical theology, human beings are not reduced to discrete sets of empirical propositions and categories. They are God-breathed and whole (Gen 2:7). This is the complex messiness that Stuerzenhofecker is hesitant to resolve. For the Lutheran theologian the trajectory for this realisation is doxological: To praise, thank, serve and obey God (Deut 6:5). Secondly, such methods provide ways in which people might more fully receive and appreciate each other. Human identity is diverse, and critical enquiry provides one method for identifying and engaging with the complexity that leads to informed, holistic discourse. From a theological perspective this offers expansive opportunity to love one's neighbour (Lev 19:18; cf. Ex 20:12–17). Just as faith in God comes by hearing God speak (Rom 10:17), people also come near to each other through the agency of their, often broken, voices (Mark 5:30b.33).

By challenging our own 'taken-for-granted', critical enquiry or research methods offer theological students and researchers the opportunity to dig deep. Such methods do not replace traditional theological enquiry. Instead, they can be effectively used in service to that enquiry as we seek to uncover, understand, and appreciate the subject, the whole 'who' of our study. Further, such methods are not fixed. Instead, they lead us to develop

⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰ J. Amos Hatch and Gina Barclay-McLaughlin, 'Qualitative research: paradigms and possibilities,' in *Handbook of Research on the Education of Young Children*, 2nd ed., ed. Bernard Spodek and Olivia N. Saracho (London: Routledge, 2005), 497–514.

¹¹ Arthur Bochner, 'Criteria against ourselves,' *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 270.

¹² Katja Stuerzenhofecker, 'A space for "thinking differently": learning and teaching practical theology in non-confessional settings,' *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 12, no. 2 (2015): 101.

theoretical models as ways of seeing, describing, grasping, and anticipating which are constantly open to revision. God's wonder remains, and remains to be seen.

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