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On Epistemology of Missiological Research

After presenting a workshop at a European Adventist Youth Congress one young man said, “Petr, you just used the word missiology. Is that a word that exists or did you just make it up?” That question took me by surprise and helped me realize again that missiology is a fairly young discipline and is often shrouded in ignorance or misunderstanding not just by lay people, but even by pastors, missionaries, and faculty in many seminary departments.

Recently a new Doctor of Missiology program started at Andrews University as well as at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines. For the students coming from various parts of the world to study in this program and the teachers it has been both an exciting and challenging experience. We are glad to present in this issue of the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* several articles by the DMiss students to demonstrate what missiological research is and the benefits it can bring. I have found after working with many students that there is a need to clarify several issues that generate most of the confusion as to what actually missiological research is and what it is not.

Missiology Springing from Theology

In some theological schools missiology is just one of the courses in the area of practical theology; however, in a growing number of seminaries missiology is viewed as a discipline with its own programs and department. Although there is still an ongoing discussion concerning exactly how to define missiology, it is more and more recognized as a discipline in its own right (Scherer 1987). Alan Neely defines missiology as “the conscious, intentional, ongoing reflection on the doing of mission” (2000:632).

Missiology has grown out of the theology of mission area. Theology

has always played a primary role in missiology and one would like to say that missiology has also impacted theology. But for a long time missiology has been a somewhat marginalized discipline and “missions have often been regarded as a by-product” (Blauw 1962:10). Yet, it is missiology that provides theology with its reason to exist.

This has resulted in a somewhat ambiguous relationship between the two disciplines, for not all theology is mission driven nor is all missiology based on good theology. At times the two disciplines function as sisters, at other times like mother and daughter or daughter and mother. In any case, theology and missiology go hand in hand and are inextricably linked (Kirk 1997:50).

Missiology is fueled by the realization that God is a “missionary God” (Bosch 1992:390-92). The deepest source of mission is God himself and his love. While God’s mission should be at the core of theology, God’s mission is the heartbeat of missiology. If mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in his divine purposes to restore and heal creation (Guder and Barrett 1998:4), then missiology is like a dynamic, expanding river fostering God’s mission (Nehrbass 2015).

The Interdisciplinary Nature of Missiology

In the 1970s and 1980s Alan Tippett (1987:xiii) considered missiology a science standing on the three legs of anthropology, theology, and history; however, missiology has recently moved way beyond only standing on those three disciplines (Nehrbass 2015).

The pivotal goal of missiology has been to further the *Missio Dei*—God’s mission in various contexts, circumstances of resistance, people groups, etc. For that reason it has become necessary for missiology to be informed by a growing number of disciplines other than theology. Missiology has become interdisciplinary in its nature, embracing the social sciences and any other discipline that may help to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

Missiology as an academic discipline was born and shaped through an “interdisciplinary fusion” (Krohn 2010:31; Nehrbass 2015) in order to respond to several new types of research problems that practical theology alone was unable to solve. Missiology has not just arbitrarily collaborated with other disciplines but adopted and utilized other disciplines with the sole intention to be more effective in fulfilling its God-given purpose.

Embracing other disciplines has made missiology as a discipline stronger, not weaker. One could easily get the impression that missiology depends on other “more established” disciplines and therefore does not have its own identity and should follow the already established assumptions of

those disciplines. On the contrary, that has proven to be disruptive since missiological research is driven by very distinct assumptions that differ from secular disciplines.

Missiological Research and Social Science

Ten years ago I had an opportunity to teach pastors from the Bohemian Conference a course in missiology and cultural anthropology. I remember one pastor came to me the second day of class and said, "Petr, my wife has a degree in cultural anthropology and when I shared with her what you taught us, she was very upset about you having it all wrong." Back then I did not know how to address this issue but today I can clearly see the difference between secular and missiological cultural anthropology.

Thus, it is important to explore how missiology relates to the social sciences and how interdisciplinary borrowing of methodology works in a way that missiology is well equipped to do what it is supposed to do without being compromised by many of the secular social science assumptions. How can boundaries of missiological research be set while still using elements of social science research?

The answer is not a mystery; it is surprisingly simple. At first glance, missiological research using social science research methods may look the same as social science research. Quantitative methods attempt to objectively measure and statistically or numerically analyze data collected via questionnaires or surveys in order to make general statements found in various groups of people. This method may also serve to explain a particular phenomenon (Babbie 2010). While quantitative studies emphasize measuring and analyzing causal relationships between variables, qualitative studies focus on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined nor quantitatively measured. The qualitative approach serves also to describe a particular phenomenon and provide insights that can help in pioneering new ways of understanding the situation being researched.

Social science research procedures and missiological research procedures are similar. It is also true that missiologists strive for rigorous research in terms of validity, reliability, or significance of research just as social scientists do; however, the expected outcomes are different, the research design is different, and the interpretation of data may also be different. Why?

Social scientists claim that interpreting social research requires at least a basic understanding of the philosophy and assumptions of any given discipline as they are "embedded in the design of social research." Scientists of other disciplines "who engage in social science but are unfamiliar

iar with these principles and assumptions can misinterpret their results” (Moon and Blackman 2014). The implications are very clear—if one does social science research, that person needs to take seriously the philosophical principles and theoretical assumptions behind the given discipline. In other words, researchers need to stick with the whole package.

Setting Boundaries for Missiological Research

Over the last couple of years I have been involved in teaching a Research Methods in Mission and Ministry course where the students are provided with social science research resources and asked to work through them in small groups and make a presentation for the rest of the class. It has been helpful for the students to learn about the various types of research including quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Interestingly, when it came time for those same students to write and defend their doctoral proposal, it became very clear that there is a subtle yet very striking difference between social science research philosophy and missiological research philosophy.

I began to ask if it was not just as important for the philosophy and assumptions of missiology to be followed as carefully as social scientists follow the philosophy and assumptions of their discipline. If students are doing missiological research, they need to take seriously the philosophical and theological principles and theoretical assumptions behind the discipline of missiology. Also, if that is the case, they need to make a clear distinction between using social science approaches or methods in missiological research and the way social science researchers do their research. Social science research as a whole process may not even be compatible with missiological research in some ways.

There are similarities between anthropology and sociology. Paul Mercier in the *Britannica Encyclopedia* 2017 claims the two disciplines are almost twin sisters. “The two are presumably differentiated by their field of study (modern societies versus traditional societies). But the contrast is forced. These two social sciences often meet.” Another important difference may be that sociology deals more with a society while anthropology tends to focus more on culture (Ifie 2017).

However, we cannot say this about missiology and social science. Social scientists may give a valuable presentation about research methods but when it comes to important missiological issues such as worldview change, form and meaning, and dynamic equivalents, cultural anthropologists may not even know what the discussion is all about. It is also true that worldview is not much elaborated on in secular cultural anthropology or sociology. The word is not even used when both disciplines are

introduced in the respected *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Some anthropologists consider worldview as a dead issue in their discipline (Beine 2010).

While anthropologists position themselves as “objective observers” (Nehring 2017), it is their ultimate goal to only observe and describe what they observe in a particular setting. The main emphasis of social science research then is to describe in detail not only what has been observed but also how it has been observed. This is then reflected in the report of the research.

Missiologists also want to accurately observe, however, the purpose of their observation is to seek a redemptive analogy, to empathize, to become engaged in the lives of the people group, to encourage that people group to follow the footsteps of their Savior, and to share the transforming power of God’s love. Qualitative research in particular is “the most appropriate social science approach to develop an understanding” for missionary work (Elliston 2011:111). However, a qualitative method, such as observation (findings in the field), is not the end of missiological research; it is a means for a missiological product or outcome. A desired outcome of missiological research may be a blueprint for facilitating a worldview, belief, or behavioral change. Thus, missiological anthropological perspectives seem foreign, strange, and a denial of the principles and philosophy of the secular anthropologist.

If pure scientific research is trying to understand and explain matters “without any greater purpose of research than the explanation itself” (Shuttleworth 2008), missiological research clearly belongs to the category of applied research. However, missiologist do need to do “pure” research as well and must do such research before they can work at an application.

I have come to the conclusion that Doctor of Missiology students in developing their research design often become bogged down with too many complexities when they try to meet the expectations of both social science research and missiological research. I have further concluded that it is almost impossible to adopt a social science research design into a missiological study program without becoming distracted from and staying true to the purpose of missiological research.

Example of Missiological Research

For example, let us suppose that Mark is involved in a DMiss program and is working on his proposal. He took social science research classes during his MA course work and sees an opportunity to use his knowledge for missiological research. In his DMiss proposal he proposes to address issues related to a membership decline in his local conference. He is particularly interested in developing a discipleship training program to

increase the retention of members and to mobilize them for mission work. Because such training has been partially implemented, he wants to evaluate its impact.

Following the social science design he would like to use an explanatory sequential mixed method design (Creswell 2012) to examine the impact of the institutional discipleship training in that conference. He hopes to use a survey to test the following hypothesis: "There is no significant difference between a discipleship-training church and a non-discipleship-training church in the development of urban mission." In his missiological research he wants to find more than just whether his hypothesis is confirmed or not. So he adds a qualitative study, which seeks to provide additional insights into the differences between a discipleship-training church and a non-discipleship-training church.

Creswell knows his conference does not have growing churches. He knows something needs to happen to revitalize the mission, but if he relies solely on social science research, he will conduct a two-phased multiple methods research to (1) verify his hypothesis through a quantitative methodology, and (2) provide insights related to the differences between churches with and without discipleship training by using a qualitative methodology.

He will be busy collecting surveys to find out whether his hypothesis is confirmed or not. He will need to obtain proper samples from two groups in order to survey them. After he collects the data he will use ANOVA statistical analysis to compare the significant differences between the two groups to be able to ask informed questions during his second stage of the explanatory sequential mixed method design. In the process he will need to carefully describe each step of his quasi-experimental study to objectively state whether his hypothesis is confirmed or not.

His next step then would be to conduct focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of what difference discipleship training makes or if it makes any difference. He needs to carefully describe each step of his phenomenology study in order to document that his findings are valid, reliable, and statistically significant.

In contrast to the above method, in a doctoral degree in missiology he would be expected to analyze the context in order to find ways to make a difference. Social science may help him with the first part but that is where social science research ends. His primary task in missiological research is to deal with the "so what" question, therefore a social science research design with its emphasis would distract him from the main missiological goal. Literature in missiological anthropology provides tools and theories about how the situation described in his problem statement can be addressed. His missiological task is to analyze the context and suggest culturally sensitive solutions to the problem.

A doctor of missiology student needs to realize that when social science research methods are used and social science research designs are followed there is an undesired twist to the missiological study as it would weaken the outcome and purpose of missiological research. Should such a student seek advice only from a social scientist, his dissertation would hardly be missiological because social science research requires a different research design, uses different terminology, and produces very different outcomes.

Through studying missiology Mark becomes aware of the nature of missiology and realizes that he needs to adapt typical social science approaches so as not to get stuck with the complicated statistical procedure of quoting hypothesis to meet the statistical logic. Rather he needs to move beyond to show how to meet the missiological task more effectively. In cases like Mark's, missiologists typically seek ways to accomplish a particular mission through a variety of means.

Conclusion

In this article I addressed the nature of missiology and missiological research. Missiology is like a dynamic river that can "flow" with any academic discipline examining human behavior "to expand missiological theory and applications and to extend the mission Dei" (Elliston 2011:112). Theological research as a stand-alone research method may or may not serve missiological purposes; however, missiology and theology are related disciplines. This same rational does not apply to the social sciences and missiology. Missiology can benefit enormously from a social science approach to research but may be paralyzed by utilizing social science research as a whole package.

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