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Ethnographic Action Research in Missiological Research Design: A Pilot Proposal

Introduction

Before starting my theological studies in an undergraduate seminary, I did a BA in business with qualifications in foreign trade and then completed a Master of Social Sciences. During the first BA in business, research was not emphasized very much. Most of the program focused on practical knowledge and theories in the area of management, international economy, international law, and skills in trade and negotiation. After finishing that degree I started working as an office staff member for the administration of a postgraduate program in the same university. Even though I worked in administration and was not teaching or researching, I was placed in contact with the world of research and had an opportunity to learn a lot from that experience.

After graduation I applied for both a MA in Social Science and a MA in Political Science. I was approved for both degrees and chose to take the Social Science one. In that program I was deeply involved in research, especially in classes dealing with epistemology and because of the many presentations that my colleagues and I had to make. Two methods caught my attention—Ethnography and Action Research. My advisor at that time had been involved in extensive ethnographic research during his PhD studies and my co-advisor had utilized action research in her PhD from the University of London (UK). Therefore, I had quite an interesting exposure to both these methods and spent quite a bit of time grappling with how to better apply these methods to mission. My MA research was about a certain social group and I opted for ethnographic research since it fit what I hoped to achieve.

One year later I entered a theological seminary in Brazil, taking a BA in theology and the next year started taking simultaneously a graduate degree in missiology. During that period, I started to develop a mission

research project employing ethnography in the nearby city of Campinas (Sao Paulo). Likewise, during my missiological studies, I started to realize the practical aspects of missiology and how social sciences research could be adjusted in order to make it more effective by bringing positive change to people even during the research procedures. Reviewing that period, I can now conclude that an adapted ethnography with certain elements and the aims of action research could be one of the most positive and useful methods for certain types of missiological research.

After joining the faculty and beginning to teach in the MBA program at the Adventist University Center of Sao Paulo (UNASP) in Brazil, I continued to work on how the contributions of both ethnographic and action research methods could be combined for positive benefits. Then in 2015, I was called to an Asian country to serve as a missionary where I have spent the last two years doing ethnographic research in a more flexible and informal way. I am again convinced that combining action research with ethnographic research, particularly in the villages and countryside areas, produce very positive results.

This article will explore some of the assumptions and suggestions I have discovered in using a hybrid method that have proven both effective in doing field research while not ignoring the needs of people when it comes to mission and the need for social change. This article is not an exhaustive or final development of this suggested method; rather, it is simply a pilot project that is still being developed in its foundational assumptions and theoretical structure. However, I believe that if tested and implemented in a purposeful way, based on theological assumptions, considering the social sciences contributions, and driven by missiological perspectives, it may contribute significantly to missiological research methods and strategies.

Ethnography in Missiological Research

The birth of the industrial era also created an interest in the unknown and developed a sense in many that almost everything human beings had in mind could be achieved. Driven by humanistic and rationalistic beliefs that were widespread in the Old World during the 18th century, the scientific approach reshaped society and gave rise to the scientific method that was believed to be compatible with each scientific field.

During that period, the natural and physical sciences experienced an earlier and credible development due to their objective nature; the humanities continued to be developed under the framework of Greek philosophy, and the later categorized social sciences came into existence as a result of those scientists who studied human settings, behavior, and culture.

In the 19th century, sociologist Emili Durkheim became one of the revolutionary epistemologists within the social sciences. He argued for a naturalistic method that would explain social events completely separate from God, setting the foundation for later developments in the area of social sciences methodologies.

Later in the same century, anthropologist Edward Taylor started testing a much more interactive method in order to understand and analyze the life of exotic people groups who lived far from any influence of Europe (1881). The book presented an ethnographic method, which was later further explored and developed by anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski (1914) and Franz Boas (1963). The ethnographic method was basically a description of social and cultural groups from within, with all their rituals, logic, rules, social protocols, and particular meanings. Ethnographic research was then applied extensively to sociological, anthropological, and political science research, although today it is no longer only reserved for those subfields.

It is difficult to define ethnography in clear and objective terms since the flexibly and adaptability of this method, combined with the several different formats as employed by various researchers over time, represent a much more fluid methodology used in the social sciences in contrast to a much more rigid and fixed methodology in the physical sciences. This characteristic has resulted in many negative critiques of the method from both outsiders and from ethnographers themselves. One of the criticisms is whether or not researchers have the right to print their own interpretations of the final outcome of the ethnographic record. That is to say, the whole research record is carefully systematized and interpreted by the researcher, and most of the time, the report seeks to present a coherent rationale to explain the social protocols and rituals of the researched subjects; however, such a report is written from the perspective of the researcher's own worldview, of which he or she may even be unaware of.

Apart from those critiques, ethnography has proven to be a unique method that provides research with unique features. Among those are the ability to live within a totally different social group, the assimilation of the researcher by the group, access to the inner circles of a people group where values and worldview are shared and a much more genuine interaction can develop based on trust and truth that enables access to core value information.

Very early on, ethnography started to be applied to mission research; however, not in the same way that it is being applied to missiological research today. Nevertheless Catholics from the 17th century and Protestant missionaries from the 18th century started to employ some forms of ethnographic studies, although some of them were for colonialist purposes

(La Platine 2003:33, 42). In fact, missionaries from that time period were often valuable resources for the colonial powers to some extent, for they held valuable information about the local people and culture, that once obtained made the exploitation by the colonialists powers much easier.

In the 20th century ethnographic methods began to be applied to missiological research using formats that were more academically-based and with an ultimate focus on getting information that could help in the outreach process to particular people groups.

When doing missiological research it is important to keep in mind the following core elements of ethnographic research: (1) the researcher must enter a social group and live within it as much as possible; (2) confidence and respect are key elements in order to gain access to a group; (3) seek trustworthy people who might become cultural informants; (4) it is essential to have open dialogs, to eat meals together, and to interact in the daily lives of the group; (5) record every element of the society such as architecture, routines, logic systems, and protocols of the groups in a field notebook; (6) focus on the “alter” (the differences) and in the symbolism employed; (7) remember that interviews, pictures, drawings, and maps are useful; (8) give special attention to rituals and their meaning; (9) note symbols and seek to decode them; (10) keep the local values and world-view in sight; and (11) keep asking key questions about group practices regarding the research questions.

When these elements are employed in missiological research, access to core information and a more vivid understanding of the group researched is possible. However, when doing missiological research other concerns must be kept in mind.

First, secular ethnographies are totally disconnected from religious values, and in almost all cases, driven by a strong relativistic framework that is at the core of contemporary social science philosophy.¹

Second, immersing oneself in a different culture and social group may represent a challenge to Christian researchers who are committed to core Christian values. The Christian ethnographer will be forced to make key decisions and stand for biblical principles while living among the group. This is vastly different from secular ethnography, where the researcher has a relativistic approach to life with no hesitation to experiencing the different lifestyles within the group researched.

Third, Christians doing participant observation for missiological ethnographic research will systematize the data based on perspectives other

¹ Both Boaz and Malinowski built, to some extent, upon the framework of Darwinism in order to foster their cultural relativism theory (Boaz) and structuralism theory (Malinowski). Modern and contemporary anthropology is essentially relativistic at its core, as are most social science theories (see Boas 1963:149).

than cultural relativism. Biblical theology must orient the interpretation of the data gathered using social science research instruments. Special care is essential not only to maintain a valid biblical orientation for the research but also to maintain a missiological focus that would not ignore immoral patterns and practices. This is where tension exists between secular academic research and the claims of theology (and practical theology). One way to meet this tension is to remain committed to biblical principles while utilizing the tools of social science—especially ethnographic research—during the research process. In this way a somewhat safer utilization of ethnographic methodologies can be employed in missiological research.

Action Research in Missiological Research

Action research was a much later development than ethnography. After the later waves of social science methodology development, action research started to be developed and applied in scientific contexts around the 1940s in the United States (Ferrance 2000:7). It was first utilized in social psychological research and then migrated to several other areas. It has been particularly utilized in social work and education field research. There are many commonalities between ethnographic research and action research, although each method has preserved several unique features that provide research with different contributions.

Noffke and Stenvenson describe action research as a “non-linear pattern of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on the changes in the social situations” (cited in Ferrance 2000:7). German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin is considered to be the originator of the method. He stated that action research is “a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action” (1946:35). Action research, therefore, consists of a research process that aims to interact and provide solutions in a practical sense to some problem or the issues related to it. The action demanded to sort out the problem is not disconnected from the academic investigation and reflection. Ultimately, the method claims to provide real and positive changes and does not deny the importance of so-called academic rigor.

A unique feature of action research, though, is that it claims to go beyond the border of mere intellectual reflection. Action researchers tends to reject the perspective that research is comprised of purely theoretical or passive activity. Consequently, a core component of action research is to bring positive change to the problem itself. Action research involves key elements that characterize the method: empowerment of the participants, collaboration by participation, acquisition of knowledge, and ultimately social changes (Masters 1995).

Action researchers have produced various contributions and critiques of the method. One criticism is a concern the method is pure action without intellectual or academic reflection. This critique caused action research to be unwelcome in certain scientific fields. Some of those criticisms came from science theorists who spend most of their time in abstract theorization and idealization of science and who have little if any time for actual engagement with changing social activities. Perhaps the deviation of action research from the traditions of intellectual scholasticism (that is the basis of much scientific thought), and the tendency of action research to promote change is one of the reasons for such critiques.

When looking for the core elements of action research, several authors present different types of the method,² but most seem to agree on three basic formats that gravitate around these three perspectives: (1) a scientific and technical action research perspective, (2) a deliberative and practical action research perspective, and (3) a critical and emancipatory action research perspective.

All three perspectives require the direct involvement of the researcher and of those being researched, as well as bringing about strategies to solve the problems encountered. Direct involvement should be done following the spiral steps that are essential to action research: planning, action, results, reflection, followed by more planning, action, results, and reflection. In this sense, participatory action research as developed by the educator Paulo Freire suggests that those who are being researched (specifically in the education field) should stand and engage the research actively along with the researcher. Freire suggests that there is no transference of knowledge in a merely passive and reflective attitude; therefore, participation should be central to the method (1970).

When it comes to action research applied to missiological research, it still seems to be limited to some preferred subfields within missiology. For instance, the American Society of Missiology (ASM) has only a few papers dealing with action research.³ The University of South Africa (UNISA) holds a few more research entries than ASM that employed action research in a missiological context, but overall the application of the

² Janet Masters in her paper on “the history of action research” presents three differing modes of action research discussed by several action researchers. For instance, as Masters indicates, Grundy (1988:353) presents the three modes: technical, practical, and emancipatory (in Holter and Schawrtz-Barcott 1993:301) and which indicate a technical collaborative approach, a mutual collaborative approach, and an enhancement approach. McKernan (1991:16-27) suggests a scientific-technical, practical-deliberative, and critical-emancipatory modes. See also Janet Masters (2000) *The History of Action Research*.

³ A survey with the key words “action research” at the American Society of Missiology website found very few related articles as of November 2016.

method is still incipient within missiological research.⁴ It is interesting to note that most action research projects deal with themes such as social justice, ministries of compassion, or education when used in missiological research.⁵ Those themes seem to fit well with an action research methodology, for they usually represent situations demanding real life changes, such as poverty, refugees, human exploitation, homeless issues, lack of access to proper education, and other related themes.

Action research has not been used much in missiological research, perhaps due to a preference for more conventional research methods. It is interesting that an action research approach correlates in many ways with some of the pragmatic characteristics of missiology. Practical theology claims to go beyond mere intellectual exercises and so does action research. Practical theology's ultimate goal is soteriological by nature; action research's ultimate goal is transformational by nature: to change positively the environment, life, or situation of the subjects researched. Practical theology seeks a response from those who have been ministered to—love, care, and preaching are expected to take Jesus to those ministered to with the hope that they will respond in faith; action research demands participatory involvement from those researched in order to promote empowerment, a positive exchange of knowledge, participant involvement in issues of concern, and development of strategies to overcome them.

The above correlations represent interesting aspects of action research yet to be fully explored in missiological research. In missiology, action research has the potential to decrease the gap between purely academic exercises and the goals of mission. For missiology to benefit from action research the following key elements should be highlighted and followed: (1) identify a problem to be explored from a missiological perspective; (2) encourage participatory involvement of the researcher and the engagement of those researched in the discovery and search for solutions of the problem (empowerment); (3) develop strategies in partnership with the local individuals that are being researched; (4) implement the strategies and assess the results; (5) maintain commitment to the underlying theological paradigms, research objectives, and social changes expected; and (6) encourage additional participatory involvement as needed.

Other elements that can further consolidate the practical aspects of action research with missional aims may include: (1) Christ-centered lectures, (2) training the community for empowerment, (3) providing social

⁴ Thesis and dissertations defended at University of South Africa can be found at: <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/506>.

⁵ A survey of online databases of thesis and dissertations that utilized action research in theology or missiology programs indicate a preference for those subfields when employing action research (December 2016).

services as a means to meet immediate needs, (4) offering Bible studies as an additional opportunity to exchange community information with the local people, (5) involving the community in practical involvement in social service and spiritual activities (limited to non-teaching activities).

Similar to ethnography research, action research also demands adaptation when applied to missiology. One of the main concerns is with proper empowerment of the people researched and proper strategies that will not only fit the reality of that context but also are faithful to missional claims. As Norbert Elias and John Scotson indicate in their research on sociological interaction between traditional and non-traditional communities, the approaches and ideas of outsiders are not necessarily welcome or perceived as positive by insiders. Consequently, an adaptation of the insider and outsider perspectives are needed to implement the best strategies that fit the reality of the community (1994:160).

Ethnographic Action Research in Missiological Research: A Pilot Proposal

Having introduced the main elements of both ethnography and action research and its application to missiological research individually, this section aims to present a combination of both methods in an “ethnographic action research” pilot proposal specifically applied to missiology.

Both an ethnographic method and action research method are participatory at their core, avoiding mere passive intellectual reflection and both approaches holding one unique element that may make a positive contribution if combined in missiological research. Ethnography’s most distinct feature is its ability to immerse itself into the deeper aspects of a people’s social life and describe (and interpret) them from within, acknowledging the local theories while collecting and interpreting data. Action research’s most distinct feature is the empowerment of the people researched to help them discover real solutions that should be jointly designed and implemented to solve real social problems and change real life situations. In parallel with those features are the transformational and soteriological aims of mission, to which missiology seeks to contribute through the study of missions. In this sense, ethnographic action research can be described as a combination of the unique contributions of both methods with the aim to understand the culture of the community or group researched and bring about the transformation needed in their lives and contexts. In this pilot proposal, however, transformation is not limited to social change, although it might be driven primarily by social change. The ultimate goal is the transformation of people’s lives and hearts that is only possible when individuals receive Jesus as their personal Savior and become united with him by faith.

Consequently, ethnography action research should preserve the goal to develop a deep understanding of the community or social group and from that understanding encourage development of participatory strategic plans to deal with *immediate* needs focusing on the *ultimate* need, that is Jesus “the hope of glory” (Col 1:27), the core of missions.

As ethnography in mission research deals with the ability to immerse in new cultures, it provides research and understanding of the local worldview and the people’s perspective of God, thus supporting the building of bridges to reach out to those individuals. When combined with action research it should create important elements of emancipation from sin and its bondage, the empowerment of the people, and the very implementation of strategies to change their view of reality and life itself.

Figure 1 describes ethnographic action research as immersed in the culture of the community and bringing about the empowerment and changes needed.

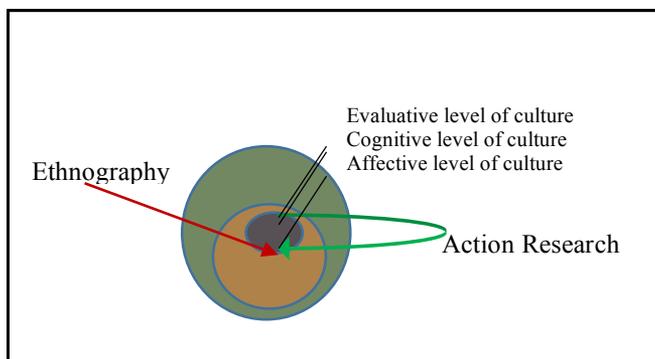


Figure 1. Ethnographic Action Research at different cultural levels. *Source:* the author

When both main elements of ethnography and action research get combined in missiological research, there is a shortening of the distance between academic reflection and the pragmatic aspects of practical theology. Personally, during some of my research as an ethnographer or while employing methodologies such as interviews or questionnaires or participant observation I felt compelled to somehow intervene in those contexts to present Jesus, the Bible, and to engage in outreach among the people. As an academic researcher, however, I had to work within the ethical boundaries of research. In the end, the data were systematized and papers written, nevertheless there was still a missing ingredient—the benefits those people would have received if change and transformation of their lives had been included as a part of the research moment.

This concern was due to the pragmatic characteristics of missions that directly conflicted with the passive-reflective nature of a significant portion of science as done within the academy.

This tension can largely be eliminated by uniting action research with ethnographic research as a missiological method. In this way the mission researcher should not only be able to investigate the deep meanings of the new culture but also empower the people with the unique Seventh-day Adventist message of Scripture, health information, education principles, while encouraging them to plan strategies to improve their own community, make the required changes, and ultimately help them commit their lives to Jesus.

Ellen White presents two interesting statements about the way Jesus researched his audience before ministering to them.

While He [Jesus] ministered to the poor, Jesus *studied* also to find ways of reaching the rich. He sought the acquaintance of the wealthy and cultured Pharisee, the Jewish nobleman, and the Roman ruler. He *accepted* their invitations, *attended* their feasts, *made Himself familiar with their interests and occupations*, that He might gain access to their hearts, and reveal to them the imperishable riches. (1999:45, emphasis added)

Jesus' ministry also comprised a level of research and sought for understanding about the people he wished to reach out to. Furthermore, he immersed himself in their social life and interacted with various segments of society, while never going against the principles he came to share with them. There are many interesting similarity between the above description of Jesus's method and some of the elements of ethnography. Immersion in a culture, social participation, and previous study of the group are the most remarkable similarities.

"Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me'" (White 1999:363). The level of interaction that Jesus had during his ministry would be a positive in ethnographic action research, particularly as a way to define community needs during the data collection phase. The action research approach also allows and encourages another important feature that Jesus employed when he ministered to their needs, thus promoting social change and opening the way to reach out to the people spiritually.

Ethnographic action research would allow for a description of people in their context, would provide tools to understand their needs during the ethnographic data collection stage, would make provision for ministry to those needs during the action research itself, and after strategizing and

empowering of the individuals through innovative ways of participatory thinking, the Bible and the Adventist message could become a driving force in the lives of the people.

Therefore, two main gaps may be fulfilled with an ethnographic action research method when applied to missiological research: (1) the penetration to the inner levels of the culture, allowing the researcher to understand the values and worldviews of those researched during the data collection phase, thus providing the missiologist with core information on their local theories of life, values, language, perceptions of religion, and their most prominent needs, followed by (2) the empowerment of those individuals in a participatory way by strategizing relevant means to fulfil their needs, thus ministering to them even during the research itself. This appropriation of the unique elements of both methodologies explored within missiology will not only provide relevant sources for study and understanding, but will also allow for ministering to the practical needs of individuals and the community. When needs are met and relationships established the possibility exists for future direct ministry that can result in the people becoming committed followers of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As an integrant part of practical theology, missiology has an advantage of not being confined within the boundaries of social science methods. Although, as an academic discipline missiological research makes use of some social science methods, its interdisciplinary nature and theological perspective should allow for innovative methodologies that not only contribute to academic research but also fulfill the mission of God even while doing research.

The pilot proposal introduced in this article presented a suggestion for an innovative methodology in missiological research. The proposed method combined methodologies from two main fields, ethnography and action research, combining their elements in a method that seeks to copy some of what Jesus did in his ministry. Missiology should also contribute to the fulfillment of the mission of God in our world; consequently, the proposed ethnographic action research method has the potential to directly benefit the church's participation in God's mission, all this while doing research in a more innovative, outreach oriented and missional way.

Finally, the practical results of the proposed method are still to be verified in missiological research. However, if all the elements mentioned above are combined in a genuine outreach methodology (as an ethnography action research plan) not only will valuable data and knowledge be gathered about a people, but also the practical claims of missiology may find a way to be fulfilled for the sake of ministry and salvation.

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